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THE MAGAZINE OF

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 14, No. 3 MARCH

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*(Vanguard rocket at time of firing of third stage, with second stage falling off)*

*Joseph W. Ferman*, PUBLISHER *Anthony Boucher*, EDITOR

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## *Coming Next Month*

The cover story in our April issue (out around March 1) will be Fritz Leiber's novelet, *A Deskful of Girls;* and even the vivid Mr. Leiber has rarely created so visual a tale of psychiatry and horror—and, of course, girls. The other feature novelet will be *Guardian Spirit,* latest of Chad Oliver's moving studies of the effects of interstellar anthropology upon primitive races . . . and upon the investigators themselves. Reprints include a farce of the impossible by Robert Arthur and an unexpected fantasy by Victoria Lincoln; and there'll be new stories by Avram Davidson, Brian W. Aldiss and other favorites—plus the first published story of the latest F&SF Discovery, Kit Reed.

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*In* The Chestnut Beads *(F&SF, October, 1957), Miss Roberts exposed the terrifying true purpose of witchcraft: to prepare women to take over the world, in vengeful power, when men have all but destroyed it. Now, in a short novel of great emotional intensity (and a nice avoidance of easy emotional solutions), the witching (in varied senses) Jane tells of the world after that taking over. This is a direct continuation of* The Chestnut Beads, *but an independent, self-sufficient story, needing no preliminary synopsis beyond the quotation below of the last paragraph of the earlier novelet.*

# *The Bundu*

*by* JANE ROBERTS

*The women would be taught, the children taught and cherished. And the men, the betrayers, sent to till fields anew, to build new altars to old gods, to be servants until the women's hatred, the witches' hatred taught them again the ancient truths.... And she sat alone, Migma, the Bundu, the She-Devil, fingering her chestnut beads.*

° ° °

THE WOMAN'S HUTS SQUATTED LIKE wooden frogs on the hill. At dawn and sunset, the aromatic odor of cooking food, fats, and spices floated downwind to the valley. The men could see the women moving back and forth by the fires, and when the wind was right they could even hear their voices; pretend that they were waiting, arms thrown wide; pretend that they would welcome and comfort the men folk.

But it was delusion. The men hid in the woods on the other side of the deserted highway, and when they sniffed the wind they licked their chops and muttered among themselves.

There was only one way to survive, to climb the hill in surrender. Yet it was only those who could hold out no longer against the cold and hunger who made the short journey and lay exhausted, waiting for the bald-headed woman. She could be seen each morning at daybreak when she would drag the



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men inside and disappear again behind the rude but effective fortress.

On her return, the women sent up such triumphant blood-curdling yells that even from their hiding places the men could hear clearly the screaming condemnation. It was for this reason that more did not rush toward the sanctuary and the promise of food. No one knew what waited them there; they knew only that open warfare had been declared by the women since the bombing, and that men must enter the camp in surrender, or not at all.

At night they blindfolded themselves, or tied themselves to the elm trees; but there were always a few who could not resist, or new arrivals who scoffed. These would stand out in the open, cursing, trying to look away while the women danced, wild dances in the moonlight with their hair flying.

They would sneak closer, those not tied. The others would watch, able to move their eyes only, straining at their self-imposed bonds. They had not known a woman now in over a year. And all the while, the smell of roasting meat tempted saliva to their mouths. They clenched and unclenched their fists. Later they fought and even killed each other in rage against this thing. A few would curse and spit and walk slowly up the hill, not looking back.

About fifteen miles away from both camps, a man walked up the highway south of Albany. It was twilight, and his footsteps were the only sound. A thin layer of snow glistened white on the rolling hills. He stopped now and then to rest and watch the low formation of winter clouds.

His name was Rob Brackett. He was of medium height, but lithe, with green eyes, gray-brown hair, a full beard, firm jaw and heavy brows. A rifle hung across his shoulder and his brown leather jacket was ripped from the armpit down. A red sweater showed in the gap, and as he walked he blew continually on his hands. One glove was torn, and his fingers exposed to the cold. His back ached with the weight of his supply kit, and his shoulders were sore where the leather strap bit between the blades.

Nevertheless, Rob made his way toward the city as men have always done, tired after a day's work, stopping to rest, yet anxious to reach town before nightfall.

But in this city, as in all the cities on the planet, no lights burned. There was no illumination in windows or taverns, in restaurants or gas stations. No women waited anxiously behind winter-closed doors. No children did homework on living room tables; no men watched television while their wives did dishes or chatted with neighbors.

Rob Brackett knew this; yet with each town he approached, his eyes lit up and his steps quickened. When the road circled down into

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the city, he cocked his head, listening. There was a touch of jauntiness about his shoulders, and all the time his mouth laughed at hope.

For Albany was like all the other towns, deserted, a mad architect's dream. His eyes watched in vain for a sign of civilization. Somewhere, he thought, there had to be more than the desperate bands of beaten men that he had seen, the groups of wild-running women.

He had never been overly dependent upon the society of his kind, but now, with surprise, he realized it would be a comforting thing to know that somewhere sane men had banded together in purpose and fellowship.

Rob slowed down his pace now, coming into the town. His face was determined, self-contained. From his father, a professor, he had acquired a fear of emotionalism that was supplemented by the stern sense of privacy he had adopted to defend himself against his mother's vivacious prying.

He had been an artist, commercial, to make a living, and had painted what he liked on the side. Now, with society destroyed, he wondered sometimes if he had not failed in some undefinable responsibility toward his fellow human beings. Only now did he realize how much he had relied upon society's framework. Before he had only given it lip service in order to be free.

Well into the city, he stamped his feet and listened to his footfalls crunch in the thin layers of crisp snow. There wasn't anything to eat in any of the food stores. He might have known, he thought, not a can, not a bottle . . .

He spied the box of crackers through a broken window. It was better than nothing, and he ate them one by one, squatting down behind the bashed-in grocery counter. His lips were dry when he finished. Licking them did no good. He scooped up a handful of snow, took a mouthful and spat the rest on the ground. It was growing colder now. A strong wind swept through the deserted streets. He laid his rifle across his knees and decided to put up for the night. He was tired. His car had broken down over a week ago, and he hadn't found another. It had taken five days to travel from New York.

Oh, it's a great life, he thought, smiling the bantering smile again, glad of his beard because it kept his face warm. He lit a cigarette and sat in the doorway watching the streets, trying to forget the nagging reminder that he had only three smokes left.

"Hey! Hey, people!" he yelled. "Hey, somebody, I'll paint you a picture for some grub. Hey!" He ran out into the streets, calling up at the crooked buildings. "Nobody home." He laughed as if it were news.

It wasn't a very good joke. He went inside slowly, wondering what

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they could say, all the dead people, if they could have answered. It had been a foolish thing to do anyway. He couldn't be sure that the city was deserted, that at any moment a wild gang of screaming women wouldn't descend upon the streets like a horde of revengeful banshees. He had thought Washington was deserted too, he remembered, and grinned ruefully.

When morning came, he nibbled a few crackers, washed the sodden mess down with snow and left, neither sorry nor glad, but with the thought of the Adirondacks strong in his mind. What better time to go there and live off the land? He shrugged and yelled at some geese flying south.

That afternoon he left Route 9W behind him. It was wiser, he decided, to keep off the main road so he could not be so clearly seen. The land was rolling, rising in soft hills, and as the afternoon passed he found deer tracks and followed them down to the river.

His stomach was a pang of hunger, but resolutely he made himself a shelter for the night before hunting for food. The pines were thick and heavy, pungent against his nostrils. He cut down some of the fullest branches and laid them on the ground way under by the trunk, so that the lower branches were only inches from his face.

This done, he crept back outside and hid in the foliage. Deer, he knew, were hard to fool, but cold water trickled just beneath the river's layer of ice, and here and there the water flowed free. It was an excellent drinking hole.

Expectation tensed his muscles. He tried to think of anything but food. He had shot some deer and rabbit just out of New York, but that had been days ago, and the last eaten long before he reached Albany. Darkness was beginning to fill up the small hollow, and in his mind's eye Rob hopefully projected the image of a buck. It was dappled brown and majestic, walking slowly toward the water.

"You're thirsty, buck, awfully thirsty," he told it, and sat there, trying to make it real. There was a sudden sound in the lower brambles by the river. He aimed carefully, grinning. His buck was a cottontail. It stood there sniffing, ready to hop when he shot it. The water swished against his boots as he waded across and carried the rabbit back.

His fingers caressed the soft fur of the animal's body as he cleaned it, and he did so carefully, because it had been such a perfect thing. The fire he built crackled in the darkness. The snow sizzled into steam, and the odor of cooking rabbit rose in the smoke. He had taken his boots off and placed them by the fire when another movement made him look up.

Not six feet away, another rabbit appeared, attracted by the light. He

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aimed, grinning at his luck, skinned it, and placed it on the stick when the other was done.

The noise of his eating, the crackling of the fire enclosed him in a microcosm of temporary comfort. Life stripped down to the essentials pleased him. He had made an order amid chaos, he thought, and his eyes surveyed the small circle of light, the rabbit cooking on the fire, his boots and rifle.

What was that? Quickly he stamped out the fire, threw the half-cooked meat under the shelter, grabbed his gun and hunched back in the pines, listening. Footsteps. Closer now. He could hear quietly murmuring voices, and cursed because he could not see in the sudden darkness.

They came out of the shadows slowly, six men, and only one with a rifle. Rob sat quietly, hardly breathing.

"Been a fire here someplace," one of them said. "And fire means food. Smell it?"

"Shut up. Suppose it's a trap?" They were in front of the tree now. Another man stepped up. He was short with thin arms gesticulating quickly as he talked. "They don't need to set traps for us. What the devil do they need to set traps for us for? Some devil probably bagged himself a rabbit and didn't get caught."

They sat down. Rob frowned. They were going to wait him out, he thought, and felt the greasy rabbit on the ground beside him.

Why not? He was full. Tomorrow he could kill another. Why the hell should he sit there hiding the damn thing with hungry men outside? He shrugged, deciding, crawled out from the back branches, and threw the meat across the ground.

They grabbed for it, ripped it apart, and fought over the pieces. He stood watching, keeping them covered. They didn't seem to have a leader. When the meat was gone, they smacked their lips and looked around for more.

"That's all," Rob said. "I ate the other," and they looked up as if noticing him for the first time. He still kept the gun on them, but one grunted and stamped his feet. "Ain't no use keeping us covered, mister. Our rifles ain't got no shells."

Rob watched them a minute, shrugged and crawled back beneath the shelter. "Better beat it," he called. "I've got the rifle and a pistol in case you've got any ideas." They muttered among themselves, and he listened to their footsteps retreating. When they left it was a long time before he slept.

## II

He found their camp in the morning—a mottled array of shacks and shanties, torn windbreakers and discarded huts scattered in a small clearing between the pines. The ground was littered with bits

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of clothing, bones, charred firewood . . .

In the center, dirty men squatted in small groups. Only a few had rifles, pistols maybe, but nothing larger that Rob could see. If the men the night before hadn't mentioned traps laid in the woods, he never would have stopped, but it was best, he decided, to find out if there was going to be any trouble, and prepare beforehand.

It seemed unlikely that the wild bands of women he had seen in Washington could have worked their way so far north; still there was only one way to discover who had laid the traps the men had spoken of. To ask them.

As he began to walk down the hill, the men didn't move. They stared with rigid contemplation toward the small mountain that rose on the other side of the hollow.

He walked down the hill slowly, with his hand on his gun. When the men saw him, no one looked up. Not one hand reached for a pistol, but there were no welcoming smiles either.

Their air of dejection and the slovenly atmosphere of the camp made Rob pause as if fearing contamination. It was a place where men came to die. He sensed it without coming closer. The men were bone-thin, weary. A heavy despair had settled over their faces like layers of thin dust.

Curiosity egged him on. He sat down. A few heads turned toward him, then impatiently looked back to the hill as if he were a latecomer intruding at the crisis of a motion picture.

"What's up there?" he asked.

The man next to him grinned thinly, showing edges of yellow, uneven teeth. Wrinkles spread tight from his lips to his narrow brown eyes. His sparse no-colored hair lay on his forehead like piles of dirty string. "Ain'tcha got eyes?" He spoke in a high, womanish voice. "Name's Harry Okra, whatcha want?" He paused and looked up slyly. "Must be after something."

"No." Rob motioned to the others. "What are they staring at?"

"Stars, stars, boy. They're studying the stars." Harry grinned, enjoying himself, and Rob shrugged.

"OK, have it your way." He sat back, thought about lighting his last cigarette, changed his mind, and watched the men through half-closed eyes. Their skin was windred, and assorted remnants of torn clothing hung from their lean frames. Their heads were set in such determined attitudes of absorption that Rob followed their gaze with rising excitement.

But there was nothing there that he could see, and it was no concern of his. Their apathy filled him with disgust. In a week or so he'd reach the Adirondacks and the world could go to hell. He stood up in sudden anger, then remembering what he had come for, he turned to Harry.

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"You said something about traps last night—someone not letting men hunt?"

"Traps?" Harry grinned with exaggerated innocence. "Any of you guys know anything about traps?" The men turned around, embarrassed, wetting their lips. Harry winked at them. "See, nobody knows anything about traps," he said, emphasizing the last word.

"OK." Rob started to walk away. He could take care of himself in any event, and if things looked bad, he'd cross the river. He heard the voice before he'd taken two steps.

A boy was running across the clearing. He looked about fifteen, and started talking quickly. "Don't try to hunt, Mister." His face was red, his wide eyes bulging with seriousness. He stumbled over the words, watching Harry out of the corner of his eye. "The women . . . they don't let anyone hunt but themselves. You were just lucky so far."

The men looked uneasy. Their faces registered relief because the boy had warned Rob, and shame because they would have let him leave without speaking themselves. A few stared at him belligerently. The boy shuffled his feet. "Don't shoot a deer even if it's asking for it," he said.

Rob grinned down at him. "It sure would be a temptation."

"I'm not fooling." The boy looked hurt.

"Women, huh?"

The kid's face flushed. "Near a hundred. Some of them are pretty, too." He waved his arms suggestively in the air. "Some of them—"

"Shut up." Harry leapt to his feet. He shook a quivering finger in the boy's face. "Shut up. We know what they look like all right. Beat it. You've done your good deed for the day."

But the kid held his ground. His face was white now. A few pimples stood out on his chin like red paint. "You should have told him," he said.

"All right, so now he knows. Just don't speak, kiddo, till you're spoken to."

Rob was watching the boy thoughtfully. He was too tall, too thin, with blond hair and perpetually anxious eyes. It seemed almost a crime to leave him there, to let him turn into one of the weary, grudge-worn men. They sat down, and while the boy talked, Rob went over an idea in his mind.

It had bothered him before this, the feeling that he had failed in some way in his responsibility to society. This would be his gesture to the new world, an act of reparation for things not done before.

He felt suddenly energetic, anxious to be on his way. A companion would be a help, too, and someone to talk with on the long, quiet nights. "Can you shoot?"

"Sure. Yeah, I can shoot fine."

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Rob stood up. The boy watched him hopefully. He started to speak, cleared his throat and blushed.

Rob made his decision. "I'm leaving now. Want to come along?"

The kid sprang up. "Yeah. I sure do," he said.

Harry swaggered over. "Whatcha want with the kid anyhow?" His voice was ugly, high. He turned to the others. "You gonna let him take the kid?"

Rob had his hand on his gun. The men muttered among themselves. "Aw, shut up, Harry," one of them yelled. Another called out, "Got a gun, boy?" The kid shook his head and the man threw his own rifle across the ground.

"OK," Harry grunted. "'By, suckers. Good luck. Hope the women don't get you." He giggled, watching them leave. "Suckers, suckers," he yelled after them, and sat down, feeling better.

The boy's name was Willie Brownson. He was eighteen, though his nervous anxiety to please made him seem younger. His youth was a sore point—a target for the men's jokes. Now he stuttered in an effort to speak slowly, and measured his words, like a man.

The destruction of his world had given a sobriety to his features, sometimes a sullen bewilderment, but his excitement mounted now, as they left the men's camp behind. Anxious to show his usefulness, Willie carried his new rifle belligerently, glared into the shadows, and matched his stride with Rob's.

"Remember, don't even whisper," Rob cautioned. "You'll scare the deer. And never empty your rifle when the animal is too far away." Willie listened seriously, and they separated, each hiding in the shadows, waiting.

The river was in front of them. Rob's arm ached when an hour had passed. He rested his rifle in his arms, listened, then quickly put it back over his shoulder. It was a whitetail deer. For a moment it stood there, then, convinced the way was clear, it came forward. There was a shot. Rob cursed Willie's lack of experience, and the deer darted back into the shadows.

Ten minutes passed, but Rob kept his eye peeled. A half hour passed, and still he waited. A few moments later the deer appeared in almost the same spot. Rob aimed carefully. The shot was deafening in the woods. The deer fell, and he and Willie rushed out at the same time.

Rob turned to clean his gun. There was a thud. He turned quickly. Willie was lying unconscious on the ground. Three women stepped out of the bushes. They were armed, and dressed in deerskin suits. Rob eyed Willie. He didn't look dangerously hurt. Rob stepped forward, but the women already had him covered.

As he watched, two of them dragged the deer to a wooden sled

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behind them. Just as they turned, Rob leapt. A rifle butt caught him at the back of his head. When he woke, Willie and the women were gone.

It was dark, with the moon not risen yet, and his rifle and pistol had been taken. He tried to block his emotions, stop the worry. What had they done with Willie? Where had they taken him? Over and over he told himself that worrying wouldn't help. He had to think straight.

Hunger gnawed at his stomach muscles. His head was still sore from the blow, but resolutely he made himself relax. His teeth stopped chattering, and he stood up, moving his arms and legs against the cold.

The thought of returning to the men's camp was abhorrent—returning without Willie, weaponless. He tightened his lips. There wasn't anything else he could do. The men knew where the women were, and he had to rescue Willie and get a gun. It was his only hope. When he thought of Harry and the others, a chaos opened up inside his mind. Because he was one of them now.

God, it was cold. He rubbed his hands together and stamped his feet. The wind was a trainwhistle high in the pines. It reminded him of all the times he had ridden, secure and comfortable, in speeding trains through brightly lit cities and freshly plowed fields. Then the picture of the men's camp returned, and he cursed softly, and spat in the snow.

Harry looked up when he saw Rob returning, and smiled to himself with crafty satisfaction. He was one of the beaten men, with the odds against him from the start: one of those predestined to failure, inoculated with moral unhealthiness before he was old enough to resist. His whole restive body was at loose ends. His large hands flopped at the end of thin, bony arms; his small head craned back and forth from a too-thick neck, and his stick-legs were loose-jointed, so that his knees protruded when he walked. As Rob came closer, Harry picked his teeth and looked away.

The others weren't surprised when they saw him. Rob nodded, built a fire, and huddled close to the heat, trying to plan, but there was a restlessness about the men now that he hadn't noticed before. Their agitation made him look up. They moved around too much, shuffled their feet. There were small fervors of pointless conversation, an embarrassed anticipation that kept at them, until Rob felt it too.

"What's the matter? What's going on?" he asked, but they muttered and looked away, with shame in their eyes, and apology. He watched, amazed, as they began tying each other to the elm trees.

It was a matter of pride with Harry that he didn't bind himself.

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Not that it wasn't hell, just to stand there and take it, he thought. But somehow it made him better than the others. "What's the matter? Ain'tcha got nothing to tie yourself with?" He walked over to Rob, teetering back on his heels.

"What for?"

"What for? Boy, that's a good one. You'll see, smart boy, you'll see," he said, and walked away. He wanted to be alone when it started, so no one could see his face.

First Rob saw the fires, monstrously bright, flaming on the hill. From down wind came the odor of roasting deer, spices, even coffee. He could taste the meat, feel its fatty substance between his teeth, the scalding coffee burning down his throat. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked up and down, stamping his feet, pretending that he was fighting against the cold.

The tantalization of hunger was enough, but then the dancing began. At the sight of the swaying women's bodies, Rob took out his last cigarette, made himself walk deliberately back to the fire and sit down, turning away.

He looked back once at the men's faces, and wanted to weep. Not only because of his own basic need, but because he understood the insult behind the women's insidious campaign. He thought of them, roasting the deer, brewing the coffee, waiting until the wind was just right. He thought of them calculating the effect of their own moving bodies, using the men's very maleness against them, to bring them to heel.

And Willie. Was Willie there, too, forced to watch, or had they killed him? He squinted, staring through the darkness, and two of the men left the others slowly, and walked toward the hill.

The sight of their surrender was too much. Rage was a bomb exploding in his skull. Did they take this, the men, night after night, and do nothing? Didn't they have an ounce of gumption left? "Are you going to sit back and take it?" he yelled. "Christ, you're half-starved now. What have you got to lose?" His words broke the spell. The men turned toward him, dumbfounded. He glared at them. "I'm going to storm that place if I have to do it alone. I'm going to get Willie back, get myself some food and a gun. What about it? Who's with me?"

The sense of outrage made him weak. His own impetuous speech amazed him. The men looked up. They weighed the idea in their minds, balanced it slowly. One by one they shook their heads. All but Harry. He longed for a fight. There was a need inside him to strike out, to get even with whatever had made him the way he was. He thought of himself, victorious, with the women defeated, and food between his teeth again. "We ain't got guns," he said.

"We've got hands, brains," Rob retorted. "You're going to starve

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anyway. Do you want to take the chance or don't you?"

Someone started it in the back. "I'm for it," a voice yelled. Suddenly they were all calling out, invigorated by the thought of action, any action. They swung the full gamut from despair to frantic hope. There was no in-between. They couldn't afford to think of the consequences of failure.

III

Migma sat just inside her hut listening to the bustle of morning preparation. Her eyes were blue-green, innocent now of the hauteur that would arch her black brows in the presence of the others. It was over a year since the destruction, but in the early morning while the men captives built the fires, she still listened, pensively, to their voices.

Frowning, she realized she was doing *it* again, and she stood up, throwing her head back, and letting the muscles in her face harden. She made her hands into small fists, touched the chestnut beads of office for support, and rushed out into the activity of the camp.

She had no right, no right, she told herself, to expect a moment's idleness. There was still much to be done. Soon the snow would fall with a vengeance stronger than her own, and the remaining survivors would be forced to surrender.

She smiled now, striding past the camp huts, for it would be these, who came last, who would be valuable, not the weaklings that ran for shelter at the first touch of hunger, or hint of cold.

The sun exploded like a bomb over the river and it was daybreak. One by one the women left their huts, bathed in the cold water, and stood in circles of nine about the fires. As always, Migma felt a surge of triumph, to see them there, waiting.

"The Bundu, the Bundu!" they called. She raised her arms, feeling invincible, and lifted her voice. The words of the litany pushed her lips apart.

"Women are the creators."

"*The creators, the creators,*" they chanted, and she felt herself the core, the hub of their hatred.

"Men are the destroyers."

"*The destroyers, the destroyers.*"

"We shall rule them with vengeance and rage."

"*Vengeance and rage.*"

"Who have destroyed the world that we have created."

"*Destroyed the world that we have created.*"

"We shall use our womanhood as a whip."

"*A whip. A whip.*"

"We shall slay the weak and purge the earth."

"*Slay the weak, and purge the earth.*"

"And only the strong shall survive."

"*The strong, the strong.*"

They paused, waiting for her to

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continue the ritual, but Migma was silent. She touched the chestnut beads of the Bundu to let them know that this moment was important above all others, and even as she thought of the innovation, she was filled with a sense of fulfillment.

Three months ago they would not have been able to take it. But they were ready now. She had driven them to hatred. Now they could use themselves as weapons. Under her control they had destroyed the women that they had been. Now she would order them to recall old ghosts, conjure up the hate-purified images of the past.

Her voice was triumphant as she felt their strength. "Let our weakness drive us to hatred. The women that we were are not really dead; they haunt our subconscious minds. Let us put them to use then! Let us call up our recollections of destruction. Think of things of which we have forbidden ourselves to think. Remember houses and children, porches, voices in summertime, husbands coming in out of the twilight.

"All these things are no more. It is to this that the males led us. Now we must deny our inheritance, our womanhood, take up vengeance and rage until men be men.

"Creation is not a kind act. It is an act of cruelty, an act of hatred against the darkness. Think, then, remember. Descend into the black hell of your memories, rekindle your revenge-lust, so that all will quail before our strength."

Her voice rang out authoritatively, but in her own mind, she called out her old name. *Olive? Olive?* The ghost of herself leapt up, bewildered. She was once more in the bright kitchen of her home. It was morning and the postman was just coming down the street. Her hand touched the gay gingham curtains, and Migma could feel the starched material against her palm. "My children! My babies! Where are my babies?"

She screamed the words. Reality was now that remembered moment, and from all over the campground, the women moaned, and cried. The screams leapt up, the collected protests, the pent-up terror. She felt it, as well as her own, the remembered fear, staring from their faces. It blew inward, radiated, exploded above them like a devil from the incantation of remembered names.

It twisted, turned, became a command for revenge, and Migma called out, the voice of the women's pulse and their fear.

"We shall revenge the murder of our world; our hatred will make them men, who are less than beasts. Because of them, I am no longer Olive. Now I am Migma, the Bundu, the She-Devil, and I say that only when we have made them worthy of creation will we give them back their world—our world—a world re-created, formed out of the chaos of our hate."

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The women were yelling, screaming. One moaned and fainted. A young girl bent down and stroked the fallen woman's forehead. "It's all right, all right," she crooned.

"Istar, come here," Migma called. "We have no room for weakness or pity. Only the strong live," she said, and Istar stood there sullenly, her round face red and her blond hair hanging limp. "Work with the beasts today!" Migma stared until the girl lowered her eyes. "If you want weakness, we'll see that you get it."

Istar's head snapped back in amazement. It was the worst punishment, outside of stoning or banishment, to work with *them*. She glowered with shame and resentment, but knew better than to argue, and Hesta, the bald-headed, led her to the work crews.

When Hesta returned, Migma began the captive ceremonies. "Bring in the beasts," she cried, and spat in the fire as the ritual demanded. *"The beasts, the beasts,"* the women called, and Hesta went with three guards to bring in the men that had sought refuge at the gate.

Migma narrowed her dark eyes and let the wind carry her black hair out from her head like a fan. Before their eyes she seemed to swell with power as the men were brought in, dragged backwards.

"The beasts, the beasts," she called. "Those who called themselves men and laid their limbs with ours. The betrayers! What shall we do with them, sisters?"

The men were disheveled, unshaven. They stared uncomprehendingly at the circle of women, the sear-mad faces, the fires. From all around the cry rose up. "Burn them. Burn them!" Hesta and the guards shoved the frightened men closer to the fire. "Burn them," the women yelled again.

Then Hesta stood apart from the others. "No, let them be slaves. Let our revenge be satisfied instead of our lust." But the others screamed in protest, "No, they must be seared," and Migma raised her arms for silence.

"They will be slaves," she said. "And eat our scraps, and live daily with their shame."

With these words, the ceremony was completed. The men were led to the prison huts where they were fed and clothed, and told their duties. At a signal, the men captives moved among the women, heads bowed, with steaming corn meal, old supermarket coffee, and biscuits roasted over the open fire.

When the meal was done, the women threw food on a large platter for the men, and went out hunting while the captives cleaned the camp and fed the animals. Hesta and Migma stayed behind to supervise the work groups. They stood before Migma's hut, staring after the hunters, and across the way, two guards paced up and down before the supply huts.

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Everything that could be salvaged from the city and countryside was there: food, guns, ammunition, gas for the one jeep, seeds to be planted in the Springtime, geiger counters, medicines, water.

Hesta paused, watching Migma out of the corner of her eye, and Migma blushed, remembering their old friendship. But it was not by tenderness that she controlled them; there was no place for sentiment. She stood up stiffly and began the morning inspections.

The few women left in the camp were cutting up deer carcasses. Everyone watched as they hung the bodies up and allowed them to cool until the animal heat had disappeared. Migma forgot her worries over Istar as she watched the women work.

They were adept at it now, laughing roughly, full of good spirits. They split the carcass, leaving a short section uncut at the neck with the halves still attached, then dragged it to the supply hut.

All the game was stored here; they could count on below-freezing weather for the rest of the winter, and the meat would stay without spoiling until the spring.

Migma watched, proud of the women's skill, and then turned away.

Hesta watched her leave. She was twenty-nine now, the bald-headed one, tall and heavy set. Her hair had been auburn before the explosion burnt out the roots, and her complexion pale. Now the wind had made her skin rough. Like Migma, she squinted often, but her clear brown eyes were calm, self-possessed.

A commotion caught her notice and she turned. A group of hunters dashed through the gate, hooting. They dragged a sled behind them; a buck was tied on the top of the sled, and on the buck's body, yelling, was tied a boy.

"Look, look what the snow brought in," they laughed, poking each other. "A baby one, a cub"—joking because he was so obviously young, untried, with no beard yet and yellow corn-silk hair. The boy kicked at his bonds, then, finding this the cause of further merriment, he lay there scowling.

Migma came running from the other end of the camp grounds. "Let him up," she ordered, and the women were quiet. Willie stood up, glaring. His legs were wobbly after being tied for so long, and he stumbled. "Quiet," Migma said and the women tried to hold back their smiles. But even Migma was not as severe as usual. "This is today's prize, huh?" she asked, bantering, but pleased.

This was the first boy to be captured, and the young ones were what they wanted. These could be trained, and even the sisterhood admitted they held no blame. Migma dispensed with the usual frightening ceremony, and stood there, looking Willie over.

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"A mascot, give him to us for a mascot," the women yelled. Willie straightened up. "I'm a man," he said; "no boy," and they all laughed.

"He wants to be a man! There are no men here, boy. Only beasts." Willie colored, bewildered by their ridicule. Savagery he was prepared for. On the trip he had been sure they would kill him, and had vowed to die without flinching, like a man. Their taunts took him off balance. He glared at them, and Migma raised her arms.

"Enough of this. This one can be a man. He can be trained. Will you turn him into a beast, like the others? From now on the boy will be set apart. He will be housed separately, taught carefully, but not coddled. This boy and others like him are the raw material with which we must work."

The women listened, their smiles frozen now, and Migma motioned to Hesta who led Willie away.

There was a sound behind her, and Migma turned. Istar was waiting, with her head bowed. She was short, slim, with a round face, blue eyes and light blond hair. For a girl of seventeen, she was unusually mature physically, and at times she regarded her body as a monster with demands and needs that her mind did not understand. Her regular features were pretty when she was not annoyed or pouting, but of late it seemed that everything was going wrong.

Now her lips slumped downward in dejection. She slouched, and was forever being corrected for sloppiness. Migma watched her a moment without speaking. "I don't ever expect you to interrupt the rituals again," she said, finally.

"No, Bundu."

"Weakness can destroy us. You must guard against it."

"Yes, Bundu."

She was so obviously miserable that Migma looked at her more closely. "What's wrong?" she asked, gently now.

The girl stared down at her feet, blushing. "Nothing," she said, Migma hesitated and dismissed her. The girl would have to be guided, she thought, remembering that she never actively participated in the ceremonies, and very seldom took pleasure in her work.

She frowned, knowing Istar would be difficult to handle, and reminded herself that the girl was only an adolescent, whose drives were just beginning to arouse her. They would have to be channeled; but it was a minor problem, and Migma walked over to the men's hut to see how the women were making out with the boy.

"Take your clothes off, you're filthy," they told him, and he stood there, glowering. "No, and that's that," he said. Migma herself restrained a smile, watching them strip the clothes off his back and carry him, still protesting, down to the river for a bath.

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The deerskin clothing they gave him after made Willie feel warm for the first time in months. He ate a big bowl of cornmeal mush eagerly, but taking his time because the women were watching and nudging each other. When he was finished, they took him to the weaver's hut, with orders to listen, watch, and learn.

Istar was returning from her interview with Migma when she saw him. Her brown eyes widened. Why, she bet he wasn't any older than she was. And to surrender! She knew a boy could run fast. Hadn't she seen them herself . . . before . . . playing tag in the schoolyard? She felt a sudden dark mood coming down upon her as she thought of it.

She used to watch them often, big, strong-limbed boys at twilight in the schoolyard when everyone else had gone. Trying each other, pitting their strength, and she used to stand there, knowing that one day she would marry such a one, and wonder what it would be like.

Her older sister had married. It was the way of life before, she thought, appalled, but she eyed Willie carefully as she passed the hut, remembering that even the women didn't hold a boy to blame.

Well, she should care! She shrugged scornfully. She'd heard the story from one of the others. He'd been caught after bagging a deer. Her face reddened, and for the first time, she was really ashamed of herself. Imagine! That an old boy should bag a deer, when she never had. She marched over to Hesta's hut and requested another chance with the hunters.

Migma was delighted the next day, to learn that Istar had killed her first deer, and even more amazed to discover that the request to hunt had been made by the girl herself. But none of them knew the thrill that Istar had felt, the excitement. She hoped, wistfully, that the boy would find out somehow.

When the hunters came back to camp they carried Istar on their shoulders; she felt more a part of the women than ever before. There was a sense of excitement and challenge that tantalized the corners of her mind. Where it had come from, she couldn't say, only that now she felt better. She grinned and patted the buck.

Migma thought of it that night. Perhaps, the punishment of working with the men had done Istar some good. Maybe it was just what she needed, she thought, smiling, half asleep now, with the campgrounds quiet.

And while she lay there, Rob led the men quietly up the hill.

IV

Now that the time had come, Rob cursed himself for getting into a position where he had to take such a chance. The men's only hope lay in surprise, in getting their

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hands on ammunition before the alarm went out. It was murky-dark, quiet, and moonless. Beside him, Harry inched his way along. They muttered together, watching the shadows, listening for suspicious sounds.

Rob tried not to think of Willie, to convince himself that the boy was unharmed, to ignore the thought, "It's your fault, yours," that hammered in his brain as he crept through the darkness.

The men would not be kind. They were too desperate; they'd been played with too long. Their tenseness was a singing communication among them now. Rob felt as if the bushes and trees tingled with their anticipation.

The valley was behind them. They had left small fires burning so that nothing would appear unusual; so that a casual glance would imagine weary men sitting sullenly in the warmth. Even when the men reached the top of the hill, they didn't dare stand up, though their bodies were cramped and sore. Harry and Rob moved closer to the camp.

Women-voices, low in the night likes wives chatting on front porches. At the sound, the men drew back, as if a signal had been given. They listened and heard the voices of all the women they had ever known: mothers speaking quietly in spice-scented kitchens; sweethearts giggling on front porches; wives whispering beside them on soft spring nights with curtains blowing gently at bedroom windows.

It was against everything they had ever been taught, the attack. They stopped in the darkness, still lying on the ground. Each was glad of the moonless night because the man beside him could not see his face. Yet slowly came the memory of humiliation, aspersions cast upon their manhood. They remembered being wheedled, pushed, shamed into submission, forced to give up their male offspring into the women's hands that their sons could be reared by the women as they had been reared.

And a stronger outrage than they had known before pushed them to action, and their hatred made it easy now to leap out upon the two guards. The women fell quickly, without sound. They tied them up, not looking at their faces.

Rob grinned triumphantly, and cautiously examined the fence. It was about seven feet high, of wood. He found the key in a guard's pocket, and the men edged in quietly, like shadows.

They could hardly believe their success. It was in all their minds now, the knowledge that, no matter what happened, the women could never be invincible again. Men had entered the camp for the first time in revenge, not surrender.

They stood there, breathing the atmosphere of the place, waiting until their eyes became accustomed

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to the shapes and shadows. Gradually Rob made out the plan of the camp; the small huts in a large double circle, and inside, five bigger ones. He squinted, trying to see, and slowly his eyes made out the figures of the guards. They were stationed two at each of the large huts.

He and Harry whispered together, and at their word, five groups of four men each made their way inside. Each gang was ordered to jump the guards at the hut to which they had been assigned. They were closer now. Simultaneously they leaped. The women didn't even have time to scream. Quickly they took the keys from the guards' belts, and went inside.

Rob was jubilant. His was the ammunition hut. He could tell by running his hands along the shelves on the wall. His fingers touched something round and cold, open at one end. A jar of matches! He lit one, quickly. The shells were in boxes. Still without speaking, he handed them out to the others. The sound of their own breath shocked them. They loaded rifles, stuffed pockets with shells, and stepped back outside.

In one of the smaller huts, not too far away, Istar lay in bed thinking of Willie. He reminded her of the boys with whom she had gone to school. The association brought pictures to her mind of an entirely different world that she had almost forgotten; a time of schools and books, boys and girls chatting between classes, cokes in drugstores, spring wardrobes and Easter corsages.

She wondered if Willie had gone to high school too? Did he use to be on a football or basketball team, have dates, listen to the jukebox at a corner soda fountain? Not that she cared, or that it made any difference *now,* she thought. Still there had been a time when it hadn't been . . . unnatural to like a boy. She wiggled unhappily. Would he have liked her if he'd met her then?

She scolded herself in the darkness and went outside. It was cold, unusually quiet. She could hear the river, the clicking of dry branches rubbing together in the wind, but there seemed to be a portion of space silent that usually was filled with sound. For a moment she felt uneasy. In the moonless night the huts were huge brooding toads.

But there was a pleasant restlessness about her now. It buried her brief alarm, and she began to walk to the toilet house. It was the only place they were allowed to walk at night. She dawdled, humming under her breath, and so effectively had her subconscious hidden her true intention that she felt no guilt, only surprise, to see Willie's hut suddenly nearby.

Was he sleeping? Not that she cared what he was doing. But just for the fun of it, and on the spur of the moment, she stood there pretending he knew she was outside,

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waiting. In just a minute, she thought, he'd open the door. They would walk down to the river. In just a second now, she told herself, wishing that he could see her, with the wind ruffling her honey hair.

There was a sudden movement inside. She leapt back. Suppose he actually did come out and find her there! She stood, uncertain, imagining him moving around inside. Perhaps he couldn't sleep either.

Was his hand on the doorknob now? She listened again. Her forehead wrinkled and she moved closer. Had she heard voices? She shook her head. It must be a trick of wind. He wouldn't dare have anyone in there with him. But she had heard something!

She frowned in sudden indignation. Why, she had a mind to go right in there and confront him! The picture instantly fascinated her. She saw herself standing there, cold as Migma. She imagined Willie saying, "All right, I'll do anything you say."

The picture was so strong in her mind that at first she didn't realize that she actually had heard the words. There was another sound. Instinctively she flattened her body against the side of the hut. The door opened. Willie and another man slid smoothly into the darkness. Even in the poor light she saw the outline of their guns. Suddenly she realized why the night had seemed so quiet. The guards weren't pacing the supply huts!

Frantically her eyes searched the shadows. She saw a movement. Another. *A raid!* What else could it be? She started to cry out. The thought of Willie's involvement stopped her. But she had to give the alarm. There was no time for rationalization, and the plan came to her as she edged along the hut wall.

Quickly, just before Willie and the man could dart around the corner, she gritted her teeth and shot Willie in the leg.

"Attack, attack," her voice screamed. Terror exploded inside her. She saw Willie fall. "Attack, attack," she yelled. There were muffled curses, scuffles, in the darkness. Suddenly the night was full of sound. The women dashed shouting from their huts, already armed, fully dressed as they slept.

There was silence as they ran into the campground and found it empty. They stopped all at once, then someone noticed the absence of the guards and a yell went up. "To post, to post."

Immediately they ran to the positions which had been drilled. Five raced to the prison hut to keep the captives from escaping. A group stationed themselves in front of the supply hut. Hesta and another division sped to the gates.

Within seconds all retreat for the attackers was cut off. The women began firing immediately. They shot at the first suspicious sound, at the crackling of a twig. Their

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ears leapt ahead of them into the darkness, smelled out the men and hunted them down.

And the men crouched, hardly breathing, in the shadows behind the huts. With the ammunition in the control of the women, they had to conserve what little they had. They lay in the bushes, taking careful aim, shooting only when a target was certain. The women fanned out from the center of the enclosure, persistently working their way toward the edges of the huts where the men were hidden.

Rob watched them. When Istar shot Willie and gave the alarm, he had crawled behind one of the furthest huts, dragging the boy with him. Now he measured the distance between himself and the front fence. It would be the easiest method of escape, if he could get past the guards. The woods, coming in almost to the first hut, would afford shelter. If they could escape now, while they still had some ammunition, there was a chance. Ammunition meant food, he thought, and looked around for Harry.

Willie was a dead weight. The wound in his leg was nasty, and Rob grabbed his shoulders and dragged him along behind him. Suddenly, in the center of the campground, a flare lit up. Then another. The women were building fires.

As he watched, two of the men made a dash for the shadows. With demonic timing, the fire flashed into brilliance. Its light caught them in its hate-hot eye, and for a moment they hung there, like dancers held in spotlight. Two shots. The men fell. Rob hesitated, then crawled out, quick, to drag them to safety.

He could have saved himself the trouble. They were dead. He salvaged their guns, and just made it back, when a pain zigzagged through his shoulder. Seconds later, another fire burst out, but this time behind him, cutting off escape by the river.

From all sides came the women's triumphant yells. Everywhere Rob looked, they were there; more of them all the time as if they had sprung, full bloom, from the flames. Slowly, crackling its fury, the fire gobbled up the darkness where the men hid. The women screamed. When they saw a man, they called out to the others and sprang upon him, clawing and biting. The men couldn't shake them off. If they tried to get away, they were shot.

Frantically, Rob tried to pull Willie away before the fires and the women had them trapped between. Bodies lay in the firelight like sacrificial offerings. He could hear the women coming closer, searching the far corners where the fires hadn't reached.

They yelled like mad housewives, seeing dirt in every corner, cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. Woosh, woosh, woosh. They saw a man and slapped him down like a fly.

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They swept the men before them with a mighty woosh of their fire brooms. Rob paused a moment to rest. Ahead of him, the fence loomed up like a mountain.

Migma doubled the guards at the gate. Now that the women were over the shock of surprise they fought gleefully, driven by fury. They could have won with half the effort, but the knowledge of the men's small forces, and the sureness of victory, only inflamed their lust for battle.

When Rob reached the fence, he knew that escape that way was impossible. As he watched, three others took the chance. They ran out wildly, and fell in midair. One man crawled toward the shadows, and the women, laughing at his efforts, pulled him back.

Almost everyone was assembled there at the fence. From inside the enclosure, there was silence. Making up his mind, Rob got a better hold on Willie and made his way back toward the huts. Here and there a few women still tormented a prisoner. The fires were dying down. The fence surrounding this side of the campground was made of earth, reinforced with wood. Rob pushed against it, testing its strength.

When he had almost given up hope, the butt of his rifle pushed through. There was only a small gap, weaker than the rest. He pushed Willie through, crawled in behind him, and lay panting on the top of the hill. He could hear the river rushing over rocks below.

In the darkness he couldn't see. The pain throbbed in his arm. He remembered that he was bleeding, tore off a piece of his sleeve and bound the wound. His hands flayed out for Willie. He had laid him down just ahead of him. "Willie? Willie?" he whispered. Just as he blacked out, he saw a figure move away slowly, as if dragging something toward the campgrounds.

## V

Inside the enclosure, the women washed their faces in buckets of cold water, straightened their hair and relaxed while the captives cleaned up the signs of battle and made new fires for the victory celebration. They were tired, sated. Istar was particularly tired. She had followed Rob and Willie persistently, all night. It was she who snatched Willie away and dragged him back to camp.

Now, with everything over, she thought of many plans that would have been more satisfactory. When the women finally found Willie, she stayed in the background, memorizing what she would say to Migma if she were questioned.

The women were taking their places for the ceremony now. The fire flushed Istar's face. She felt suddenly frightened, spiritually banished for her deceit. There had been too much confusion for anyone to

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notice her actions, but the knowledge of her guilt made her weak. She had shielded Willie. And even now, she didn't know why.

The chant began. She lifted her head, suddenly feeling absolved. Because it was she who had warned them. In her heart she swore allegiance.

Migma felt the women's expectation, held and savored it while she looked about her at the camp. The bodies of the dead had been dragged away, and the new captives bound before the fires. She turned to the women. Their faces were still battle-flushed, and her own voice was wind-strong. It filled them with a new exhilaration, shouted the tidings of victory.

"You have seen how they attacked us. They came, like animals, crawling in the night, seeking to steal what their own wits could not provide. Do you need any more proof that these are not men?

"Would men let women stand between themselves and food when they were starving? Between themselves and the satisfaction of their lust? Yet these men were hungry. Their eyes glittered with desire even as they sought to destroy us. They are the epitome of weakness. Men would have risen from bombing to further greatness. If there were men in the world, women would not have to do men's work.

"Men would have rebuilt civilization themselves. By now they would have camps to put our own to shame. But these were beasts, squatting in debris, looking with greed upon what we ourselves had salvaged, burning with envy at the sight of our strength."

Her voice rose. She closed her eyes, and then pointed to the bodies of the dead. "Take the corpses, hang them from the trees outside the camp for all to see. Let them hang there until the flesh rots and the bones fall. We will collect their skulls. They will decorate our huts, mementos and warnings.

"Creation is not a kind act. Only our hatred can force re-creation upon the earth. Women are the creators."

*"The creators, the creators,"* they chanted. She was invincible, the personification of their revenge. They swayed and chanted, and Migma called for the prisoners. They were brought before her, haggard, wounded, blood-dirty.

They expected death. Only now did they fully sense their betrayal —through their despair they stared at these women, daughters and mothers, turned executioners with fury-ridden faces.

"Look at these!" A sudden rage tore at her like wind, as she stared down at the cowering men and felt the profanity of their abjectness, the sacrilege inherent in their defeat. "Even animals have more fight in them than these." She spat at them. Disgust made her weak.

Some voice in her mind admon-

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ished her, cautioned control, but now she was yelling, inciting the women to further rage. She fought it out with herself as she stood there, hearing the forgotten voice of Olive, her earlier self, crying her sorrow in the depths of skull.

She was doing it for *her,* Olive, to make up for *her* losses. She was avenging *her,* and all the women as they had been, not herself. She turned to the men.

"Throw yourselves down on your bellies in surrender," she ordered. "Those that refuse, will be shot."

They hesitated, not meeting each other's eyes. But what difference did it make, now, what they did? One by one they dropped down.

"Would men bow down to us? They would let themselves be killed first. Are these men?" Migma called out.

*"Beasts, betrayers and forsakers,"* the women answered.

"Take them to the prison huts. Let the other prisoners tend their wounds. Even animals are fed here, so let them be given food."

The women followed the prisoners, hooting. The fires died. Migma stood alone, in the center of the campgrounds. Hesta bowed her head and walked away.

There were tears in Migma's eyes. She was the Bundu, yet during the ritual, her whole personality had been lost and devoured. She had spun like a leaf in the storm of the women's hatred, caught in a closed current, without escape.

The intensity of her rage terrified her now in retrospect. But hadn't they established order in the middle of chaos, given hope and direction to the race? Hadn't they forced themselves to be strong, because the men were weak? Any mistakes they made would be lost in the great history of their success.

So she calmed herself, slept an hour, and called for Istar.

It was easier to lie than the girl had supposed. Although she found that Migma had summoned her to congratulate her on her quick thinking, and that her questions about Willie were only secondary, Istar insisted that she had seen it all.

The boy, she said, had been forced from his hut by one of the attackers. Willie tried to warn the camp, and the man shot him. Migma was satisfied and dismissed her. There was no reason to doubt the girl. She had more than reinstated herself.

It was afternoon before Istar got the chance to sneak into Willie's hut without being seen. She slipped inside and closed the door.

Willie had waited for them to come for him all day. At first he was determined to admit his part in the attack, but as the day wore on and the women treated him with special care, he gradually understood that they thought he had somehow defended them.

Even then, he was going to

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speak. It was not cowardice that prevented him, but shame. Since his arrival at the camp, his loyalties had been sharply divided. He had been fed and clothed, taught crafts, and for the first time since the destruction, he felt as if he belonged.

He was constantly learning. The women shared their knowledge ungrudgingly. Only one restraint was laid upon him, that he stay away from the rest of the men. When Rob came that night, he had not hesitated to join him—yet even now his thoughts were tinged with guilt. How could he tell the women that in the face of their kindness he had joined forces against them?

Istar came in quietly. They stared at each other. Istar had thought of Willie so often, and built up their relationship so strongly in her mind, that she was instantly hurt that he didn't recognize her, and only later realized that there was no reason why he should.

The silence was uncomfortable. She found herself giggling nervously, not knowing where to begin. But then the seriousness of the situation made her face grow pale. "I know you were helping them! I saw you!" There, the words were out. Her eyes were round with accusation. All her tension and worry exploded with the words, and it suddenly seemed that it was his fault that she had helped him, that he had urged her on. She knew it wasn't true, but the words fell one over another. She was shaking.

"We've been good to you here," she cried. "It's cowardly of you to take our food and join our enemies against us. Just like a man! I shouldn't have expected anything better from your kind! I should have let them catch you!"

Silence. Istar was white. Willie was too confused to speak. He was embarrassed to have a girl near his own age see him in bed, and he frowned, and pulled the deerskin blanket up to his chin.

"So you know," he said finally. "Sure, sure I helped them," he went on, glad to get it off his chest now. "What did you expect me to do? Turn my friends away?"

"You could have told them you wouldn't help—yes, and turned them away."

"Beat it! I can see it now, my telling them that. They were half-starved. You don't do that to your friends, not when they come to rescue you."

"You *could* have. It would have been kinder. You could have given them some food first—" Istar clapped her hands over her mouth. That wasn't what she had meant to say at all. But Willie frowned. Suddenly it seemed as if that would have been the best thing to do. He could have gone with them to the supply hut..."That's silly. The guards would have stopped us," he yelled, furious because he'd even given it a thought.

She stared at him, hating him

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suddenly, wondering why she'd saved him at all. "I'm the one who shot you. So you wouldn't get in any more trouble," she said, glaring. "So you can thank me that you're still alive. They would have killed you. And if you ask me, you deserve it! I must have been out of my mind, absolutely crazy. Why, do you realize what I did? I lied to the Bundu! I told her you resisted the attackers. I *lied!*" The enormity of her deceit staggered her imagination. Tears started at the corners of her eyes.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked, weakly, and she yelled, "How do I know? What do you care anyhow?"

"Well ... I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Trouble. Oh, Lord," she said.

Willie watched her, feeling inadequate, wishing that she wouldn't cry. It had been a big risk for her to take, he thought, frowning because he didn't know what to say. But he had to ask one question. "Why did you do it?"

Her eyes widened. She thought, and discarded several dishonest answers. "Because ... because you're around my age," she blurted, finally, and Willie found himself grinning.

"Did ... did you go to high school?" he asked.

Hesitantly. "Yes."

"I did, too. I played basketball," he said proudly. "I was second string guard, and our team won the—" But already Istar's face had darkened again.

"You won't tell anyone, will you? Promise me. You don't know what would happen if they knew! Promise," she said, wildly now.

Willie nodded his head solemnly. "I do, promise." He waited a minute, watching her, then looked toward the small window. "You don't know what happened to the leader, do you?" he asked, with his head away, trying to keep the urgency from his voice.

"He wasn't killed. I know that. But he was wounded. Maybe he gave up."

Willie shook his head. "He wouldn't. At least I don't think he would."

By now she was determined to help. The similarity of their experience assumed miraculous proportions. "I'll see what I can find out," she said, and wondered suddenly if she would regret the words. But Willie looked so relieved that she shoved the thought away. Hadn't they both gone to high school? Weren't they allied somehow, being near the same age? "I'll come back when I can," she said, suddenly shy.

## VI

The snow began the day after the men's attack. Heavy and white, it covered the hill and filled in the hollows of the valley. The survivors of the men's attack dragged them-

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selves back to the old camp. There was no place else for them to go.

Their bodies would be landmarks, Harry thought, like petrified trees. His lower lip dropped in disgust. He had less use for the others than he had for himself. He'd never had any luck, but the rest of the men were different, not born to failure—and look at them now. To share his misfortune with them dulled the edge of his masochistic pleasure. Slowly his anger drove his lethargy away, and a plan evolved in his mind.

The others watched listlessly as Harry walked toward the hill. Sensation returned to his legs. The sharp pains were good for him; he was less likely to just sit down and let the snow take over, and as his mind was goaded to action, his plan took on detail.

The snow was deep. His boots sank down with each step. He had hoped to reach the women's camp by late afternoon, but it was nearly dark when he finally touched the top of the hill.

It was a miracle, he thought later, that he noticed Rob at all. His body was half hidden in the snow. Harry bent over. There was a slow heartbeat. He was still alive!—and now suddenly Harry knew his plan would work. With Rob as bait, his bargaining power would be stronger than ever.

His conscience lurched suddenly. "But I'm saving his life, ain't I?" he whined aloud, and grinned. He was, in fact, doing pretty well for himself, he thought—saving the lives of all the survivors and making sure he had a good deal for himself. He lumbered on. Yes, sir, it was a rule of life, he told himself, if you could work out a deal, there was nothing to worry about.

Migma was inspecting the men's work, when she heard the commotion caused by Harry's surrender at the gate. She stopped as the guards came running. It wasn't until they were closer that she saw the man. They were dragging him behind them, his head bumping up and down on the ground. He was forced to his feet, and shook himself indignantly, courageous now that he found himself unharmed.

He tried a crooked smile, shifting his small eyes to Migma. There was something ludicrously pathetic about him, she thought, watching him preen like a peacock, but with the cruelty and eagerness showing through.

"Weren't no need to drag me here," he said. "I was coming myself. Yes, sir, wanted to deal with the boss from the first." He smiled again, showing yellow, uneven teeth.

Migma turned to the guards. "Well?"

One of them stepped closer. "He claims to know—"

"Not claims—I *know*," Harry interrupted. He tried a this-is-just-between-you-and-me smile, and one

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of the guards started to jab him. Migma shook her head, and Harry grinned his thanks to her, leering triumphantly at the guard.

"This is the deal," he said, nodding his head to accentuate the seriousness of what he was about to say. "I know the exact location of the attackers' camp."

He waited, disappointed at their lack of reaction. Migma watched him coldly. "Well?" she asked.

"Well, now, I'm mighty hungry. Haven't eaten hardly anything in days. Then too, there's a goodly number of women running around here, and well ... even a man my age needs comforting now and then ..." He paused suggestively, but Migma's face was still impassive, and he went on, less certain now.

"Yes, sir. Well, I might just lead you right to their camp. Right to it. That is if you was to give me some extra grub, and a woman ... to look after me and all." He squinted, moistened his lips and shifted his weight. "Course if you ain't interested ..." He picked his teeth with a dirty fingernail and looked off into the distance as if the proposition were really of no vital interest and he had only mentioned it to be of help.

He was still holding his trump card, but Migma said nothing until he was forced to look up, and the scorn in her face made him leap back even before the guards grabbed him. His beady eyes clicked open and shut, quick, and a sly pleading made his voice shrill. "I know where the leader is, too, don't you want to know who the leader is?"

"A stoning," Migma cried, and the women came running from all over the campgrounds, picking up rocks and stones as they came. Harry stood quivering. His eyes, as they lit on Migma, were hate-narrowed, panic-filled. But they had him surrounded now and Migma motioned for silence.

She spoke slowly, accentuating the words. "Here is another specimen of manhood. He comes to us with a bargain. He offers to betray his friends, and to throw his leader in, too, to make the deal more enticing. And what does he ask in return? Only double rations, and a woman to satisfy his lust!

"What? What? No one leaps at the opportunity? No one?" she scoffed, striding among them. "All right. Stone him!"

Disgust gave their arms devilish strength. It was an exercise in hatred, and Migma watched their faces, gauging the strength of their emotion. Harry was the man who was always beaten and reviled. It showed in his eyes. The stones cut into his flesh; blood trickled down his forehead; and his features were twisted with a perverse satisfaction that whipped the women's disgust into fury. Finally Migma called for the stoning to cease. The women withdrew sullenly.

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She turned to Harry. "Where is the camp?"

"Four miles across the highway." Harry wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve. "Can't see 'em till you get right on top of 'em."

Her lips curled. "And the leader?"

"Wounded. A mile or so away at the top of the hill."

She glared at him; he tightened his lips and lowered his eyes. "Take him to the prison hut," she ordered. "Have the captives tend his wounds. And get him on the work crews as soon as possible. We can't afford to have him sitting around. There's too much work to be done."

Istar waited until they led Harry away, and managed to get herself included in the group of women sent to find Rob. The wind was stronger, and she was cold despite her warm clothing. When they arrived at the approximate location, the group divided up. Already it was dark. The wind blew out their flares.

Istar was frantic. She didn't want to see Willie's face if they found Rob dead. Almost crying in vexation, she started to turn back toward the others. She hesitated. It was her emotional interest in the search that led her to notice something that the others had ignored, a small patch of brown, hardly perceptible.

She really had no hope when she poked at it curiously with her foot. A jacket was uncovered. She stood transfixed, and called to the others. They examined the ground thoroughly, and found Rob only a few feet away. He was scarcely alive.

Migma was waiting for them when they returned. She and Hesta watched as the litter was carried past. He looked strong, Migma thought. She liked his brown-gray hair, the taut lines of his jaw, and found herself musing that he probably would have been better off if they had let him die. He looked ... independent. It was a foolish thought, so she snapped, "Get this one up working as soon as you can too. You'd think we were running a community hospital."

The preparations for the attack on the men's camp had already begun, but while everyone was busy, Istar rushed to Willie's hut. He was waiting for her, and began plying her with questions before she closed the door. What would they do with Rob now that they had him?

"What do you mean?"

"Will they kill him? That's what I mean! He was their leader. They know that. And what about the Bundu's vengeance kick? What about that?" He paused, his eyes wide and anxious. "Istar, we've got to get out of here, and take him with us!"

"But they aren't going to kill him!" Didn't he understand anything? They only killed when attacked. "They just wouldn't ... kill him, like that."

Willie shook his head stubbornly.

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"They will. They'll sing those damn chants and make a heyday out of it."

"No, Willie." She sat down beside him, trying to explain. "He'll be all right. It was his only chance, that we'd find him. When he was leading the attack the women would have killed him, but not now. We have ethics, you know."

"Ethics." Willie yelled. "Some ethics, keeping men like a herd of cattle!"

Her temper snapped. "Well, that's all most of them are good for," she yelled back.

Silence. "Istar?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I thought..." He broke off. He couldn't stand seeing her there, her eyes so large, and misery so a part of her. There was no question of their breaking apart when he pulled her close, buried his head in her hair.

From outside came the crackling of new fires, the sounds of women gathering. Chants rose up like pagan choirs. The words assaulted the hut, and Willie pressed her closer.

"I just won't go to the ritual! I just won't!"

As soon as she spoke the words, Istar was frightened. It seemed that in that moment she had forever allied herself with Willie, against her own kind. His masculinity had a strange odor in her nostrils. His light beard was made of small, sharp fingers that dug tiny spears into her cheeks. But even with the strangeness, she could almost follow the surge of comfort that crept through her body, making her limbs warm.

It was a warmth of wanting, but somehow a part of all the good things she had ever known: familiar, intangible things that had made up the essence of her snatched-away, forgotten world. But a year of Migma's training made her too frightened to accept it. She ran outside.

Already the strongest of the women sped down the hill, quick, crafty as animals. There was no attack as such. When finally the women found the attackers' camp, they picked up the wounded men like babies, and threw them down on the litters. When they returned, Migma ordered that the men be set down before the fires.

She ordered Harry to stand apart from the others, and turned toward the prisoners. "Here's the one you have to thank," she yelled, then, to the women, "We're cheated, because these are too ill to feel our rage. But we'll see that they work for their board and bread!"

It was only because workers were so sorely needed, that Migma remembered Rob, and went to the infirmary to check on his condition. He was dozing, and she stood there a moment watching him before he knew anyone was near.

Somehow she was annoyed. "Are you another too weak to work for his bread?"

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He looked up slowly. Her legs were slim and straight. He liked them, he thought, and rose up in bed. "I'm willing to work," he said, calmly.

Everything about him infuriated her; the noncommittal tone of his voice, the unperturbed glance. "You can hardly expect us to keep you for nothing. You were their leader. You're lucky your skull isn't hanging outside with the others!"

There was hardly any doubt of that, so Rob didn't answer. She swung on her heels and left. Hesta met her outside. "Well, what are you staring at me for?" she snapped, and bit her lips.

"Nothing."

"Then stop it."

"You look tired."

"Well, I'm not," Migma said, wondering at the same time why she had been so weary of late. Now, with no one around but Hesta, she could admit it. At least to herself. It was remarkable, she thought, how Hesta managed to let you see yourself plainly.

"I'm anxious to get the camp fixed up before winter sets in for good," she said. Hesta knew it was the nearest Migma could come to an apology, and she stood there, musing, watching the Bundu cross the campgrounds.

It was three weeks before Rob was dismissed from the infirmary. He remembered, long after, how it had seemed to him that first morning; like a pageant, a glmpse of some medieval gathering. Fires were burning in the cold morning air, and the men stood silently as the women began their rituals. The women sat at long home-made benches, but the men squatted on a large canvas stretched upon the ground.

The corn meal and coffee tasted delicious. He ate slowly, his eyes searching for Willie. When he finally came, the boy's happiness made his face seem even younger than usual. "You look swell." He grinned, embarrassed, hoping that Rob would notice the difference in him; that he was a man now, with a man's ways.

Still, his eyes were almost pleading. "It isn't bad here, not really. They treat you well," he said, anxiously. "You aren't going to try and escape, are you?" It was important that his own loyalties not be divided again. He thought of Istar and grinned. "Some of them, the women, are real nice."

But Rob wasn't planning to make any move immediately. He owed them something, he thought, for saving his life; but when his responsibility was carried through—in spring maybe, when the fields were clear... "I know when I'm well off," he said, and Willie relaxed.

Hesta came and directed Rob to the work crew. For the moment it was all he needed—a job to be done, a manual job that left his mind free. The air was cool and crisp. He

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enjoyed the contact of his hands against the grained wood, and it gave him pleasure to see the new huts that he helped construct.

His grudging admiration for the women grew as he observed the smoothly running parts of their organization. Here, at least, there was no disorder or chaos. There was employment of a sort, and a law, rigidly enforced.

Only one thing bothered him in particular. The Bundu announced that in the spring, a group of captive women that had refused to join the sisterhood would be sent from another camp. When she told the men, he had been embarrassed at the sight of their faces.

"Females will be sent for you," she said. "Beasts cannot work unless they are contented. But huts for them must be built on your own time." They tried to hide their faces from her ridicule, and their eagerness from themselves, and watching them, Rob saw the ingenuity behind the Bundu's plan. Already the men were fatalistically content. Now, with their desire satisfied, they had nothing to gain by escape, only freedom. And their apathy made it seem a doubtful goal.

Almost a week went by before Rob saw Harry. He was eating supper when the other man sat down beside him. "Well, how does it feel to be up and about?" Harry asked.

"Good."

"If it wasn't for me, you'd be dead by now. Told them where you was. Directed the rescue myself." Harry smacked his lips, leaning closer.

"I know." Rob picked up his plate. "Excuse me. I want to see Willie," he said. Harry spat, watched Rob leave, and eyed the women speculatively as he ate. All of them couldn't be uppity, he thought. Hell, they needed it, too. And a woman was part of the bargain—The Bundu didn't keep her part of it, but nothing was to stop him from taking his due. He picked his teeth absent-mindedly, thinking about it.

## VII

It was the middle of February, and a truce had been made with winter. The women still wore their deerskin suits, but they stopped, often now, to wipe sweat from their faces, and mud pulled at their boots with a soft gurgle.

"Istar?"

It was Hesta. Istar stopped. They were going to take her to the Bundu. They'd found out! "A minute," she said, stalling. What would she do? What would they do with her?

"Will you come here?" Hesta's voice was further annoyed now. Istar turned a fright-white face. Would she have time to warn Willie? Should she run for it?

"Bring these belts to the weaver's hut, will you?"

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She almost fell over with relief. They didn't know after all. Of course not, she told herself. They'd been careful. "I'm sorry. I was daydreaming, I guess," she said. "Is there anything else?"

"No." Hesta watched her, amused.

Istar bolted. She ran, laughing. There wasn't any need to worry. She and Willie had been careful, hadn't they? No one would ever find out, she thought.

They'd be alone, she and Willie, tonight and tomorrow night, and on all the spring-soft nights, and summer-green nights. What if they had to jump every time they heard a noise, a twig turning, a rock catapulting into the water? Once they had hidden, scarcely breathing, for a whole hour. But it was worth it.

She couldn't keep her eyes away from the sky. It was a clock ticking away with clouds, and when darkness came, it would be time to meet Willie. She thought of him eagerly, filling in his image in her mind, remembering his cornsilk hair, the wide brow, the lanky strong arms, and the three freckles just above his nose.

The river bank was muddy. Small brown weeds leapt up like hairs from a dark man's arm. A warm damp odor rose to meet her, and she saw Willie waiting standing down close to the river. He ran up to her. They giggled softly, and tumbled down the soft, wet slope. A delicious sense of secrecy made each gesture pregnant with unsaid things. They tingled with their own boldness each time a guard coughed, and the wind carried the sound down.

"Will you love me always?" she asked, as women do with no truck given to circumstance, gobbling freedom quite instinctively, at a glance.

"Of course I will. You know I will." How could she doubt it? He watched her quietly, feeling his new strength making demands, following the full outlines of her figure, touching the small places that were niches where he could test his manhood.

"No matter what, Willie? No matter what? Tell me you'll love me always, no matter what happens." She wanted to just fall inward at his touch, but the worry egged her on. He had to say the words so that through sheer repetition they would became a part of her, with the look and feel of him ripe in every syllable.

"No matter what," he said, exploring, and the February wind whirling inside too, and her lips a maelstrom, swallowing and demanding.

"I'll love you always, always," she said, touching him, imprisoning his image, and the river, and the feel of their backs against the ground. "If only we knew how long we have before they find out."

"They'll never catch us."

"But if they do? If they do?" she

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asked. His hand was on her belly. "Take me now, now, so that whatever happens, it won't matter."

"Now, now," he whispered, while the river rushed and the wind lost their voices.

Once they heard a noise and broke away. "Only the wind, it's only the wind," he said. "Don't be frightened. It's the wind." They were dreamy-eyed and silent when they walked up the hill an hour later. It was still not morning, but already the dawn sounds had begun. A few birds chirruped.

Was that a scuffle? They froze and threw themselves down and peered over the top of the hill. A sudden yell! "Willie, they've found out—" She barely spoke the words. "What will we do? What will we do?"

He looked back toward the river. The snow from far mountains had melted, slipped down a thousand hills and the river was full current high. "Can you swim?"

"Yes, yes, I can swim."

"C'mon!" He grabbed her hand. The turmoil behind them grew louder. They could imagine the guards rushing after them, beating through the bushes. How had they found out? Then the fire. It stretched into flame roads ahead of them. Willie stopped.

"What's the matter?" Istar turned. They looked back.

"It's not for us," he said.

"What? Not for us? Are you sure?"

"Listen."

She strained to hear, to see. The flame was a huge blossom. Two figures in the center were petals, blood-red.

"Quick, quick," he whispered. "At the top of the hill, we'll separate. Try and make it back before they notice you're gone. Hurry. Hurry." He kissed her and she ran.

He watched. She was part of the trees, the ground, the huts, as he followed after. He saw her, then, finally, standing with the women, and he sidled in with a group of the men, slowly, slowly, as if he had been there all the while. His eyes widened. It was Harry and a woman—one of the guards—bound in the center of the fire.

Harry's eyes smarted. The flames licked delicately at his ankles, reached slender tongues toward his trousers. He felt the woman, Agar, strain at her bonds, and spit. He reviled himself, screamed. Fear sizzled between his teeth. The shouts of vengeance were blotted out by the chaotic crackling of the fire.

Jesus Christ, was it over, then? Was this it, a fitting fire-end to his black-flamed soul? He raged at his impotence, then, seeing Migma, his terror dissolved in a tremendous animal gratitude. She dashed through the flames, glared at him contemptuously, and cut the ropes. He and Agar rushed out. Hands grabbed them, threw them on the ground. Harry's face, hands, his

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whole body turned over and over in the blessedly cold mud.

"All right," Migma called. "To the men's hut." They bound him up again and made him follow. Agar was yelling. Her hair was burned and her clothes a mass of mud and scorch. "In with her," Migma yelled. "If she wants the beasts, they can have her"—then, to the men: "Take turns. Throw lots to see who's first."

They thrust the woman into the men's hut. The men stood outside, embarrassed, shuffling their feet. A few grinned uneasily. One of them shrugged and went inside. Harry watched them, feeling no pity for Agar, only contempt. They left him there, bound outside, and except for Agar's screams, the turmoil died down.

Harry glared at the campgrounds. He hadn't wept in decades, but tears wet his scorched cheeks.

From then on, he thought of nothing else. The plan became an obsession. The men still didn't like him, but he was more likable. He was almost at ease, now that he knew what he was going to do. Now he could afford to be kind. Of course he could, yes, sir, he thought, watching the new huts leap up like toy boxes.

He singled Rob out for particular attention. He waited for him in the mornings, sidled up to him at meals, ghosted his footsteps all day. Rob tried to put up with it at first. He knew Harry's loneliness. But even when Harry was trying to be likable to avoid suspicion, it was beyond him. He pushed for tender spots, nagged, belittled.

That afternoon, Rob worked silently, ignoring him. Harry chatted constantly. His voice whined higher. "Sure don't like this much. Must get at you, too. Doncha feelit? Gets ya down, don't it?"

Rob continued working.

"I say, don't it get you down?" Silence. Rob clamped his lips shut. This time, once and for all, his silence would set Harry straight. Harry dropped his hammer and moved closer. "Why doncha sit down a spell? I'll cover ya, go ahead." He started to grab the hammer out of Rob's hands. "Here, gimme that."

The hammer hit the ground with a thud. Rob had all he could do to speak quietly. "Get away from me," he said.

Harry leapt up and down, bristling. "Whatcha mean? Whatcha mean?" His face was red. "Just tell me what's eating ya, that's all. Just tell me," he said, and Rob picked up the hammer and hit a nail hard. He didn't want to say it. There was something sacrilegious in the words that would take away a man's merit in his own eyes. He looked at Harry with his eyes mad. "Just beat it."

But Harry was like a dog with a bone. "What're you mad at?" His eyes blinked off and on.

"All right, you asked for it," Rob

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said. "I don't like you, Harry. I never have. Now leave me alone."

Harry clicked his teeth together and walked away, but there was an accounting yet to come, he thought. He could afford to wait.

That was the day that Migma came to inspect the new huts. It was almost dark, and work for the day nearly completed. The men joked among themselves. The huts would house the women captives, and the men felt like pioneers waiting for mail-order brides.

One man had made a flower box and attached it on one of the huts, under a window. The others all stood around, grinning. "You'll want lace curtains next," someone yelled. Their deep, evening voices rose on the air; their strong hairy arms glistened in the remaining sunlight.

Migma stood, frozen-faced. They had not seen her approach. She listened to the sound of their laughter, watched their sweaty strong bodies lift and bend. She looked at the flower box, and in anger at the nostalgia that the scene evoked, she yelled out at them: "Rip that thing off!"

The grins vanished from the men's faces.

It was then, in the silence, Migma noticed Rob. So he'd been helping with the captive women's huts, too. She savored the thought with tortured satisfaction, and suddenly tired, turned toward her own hut.

Because it was plain to her now, what she had hidden from herself since the first time she had seen Rob. He went about his work aloof and self-contained, but it was she who followed him with her eyes, and thought up excuses to pass the places where he was working.

She had sinned in mind, if not in deed—and was there, she wondered, any difference? Yet to confess to the women was unthinkable. It would shatter their morale, disrupt everything for which she had worked so hard.

She entered her hut slowly. Her jaw was set, and her body rigid. One small lock of hair tangled down to her forehead, and angrily she swept it back.

VIII

The men lay staring at the ceiling with bright eyes. Expectation was a singing wire among them, so that when one man yawned and stood up by the side of his bed, they all followed his example, but elaborately unconcerned. No one spoke of the captive women who were to arrive that morning. Silently they were grateful that some women had refused to join the sisterhood, or were too weak to be admitted. Thinking about it, they dressed with unusual care, taking pains not to speak or lift their eyes.

Outside the night clouds dispersed, and the camp resumed its shape. One man saw the sudden

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dull yellow dawn first. He stiffened, and the men walked out of the huts fast, with hands shoved in their pockets. They weren't allowed on the grounds until sunrise.

"There it is, the sun!" They ran, yelling out into the brass-bright morning. Their eyes leapt first to the front gate—it was empty—and then to the new huts. Pride and eagerness was in their faces. They had built the huts themselves. Now, with women in them, things would be the way they should be.

Migma saw them, and called out. They began making the fires. Hands flew gathering wood, small bits and pieces to make the fires kindle fast. Their eyes laughed to serve, because after today, the captive women would free them from woman's work.

During the morning rituals, Migma felt the tension and entreaty in all their faces. It was in her women's eyes, the knowledge that the new captives would live with the men. Outrage and pleading made their voices strained. How could they hold their heads up in the face of this? Without asking the question, they waited for her answer.

"The females who will be brought in today have betrayed their sex. They are not of us. They are merely female beasts sent to content the male beasts. They are the cowards, the incompetents, the weaklings," she began, watching them.

Yes, yes, their faces screamed. But we are women, too. Whose limbs will lie with ours? Our wombs are empty. Why should they be allowed what we are denied? She knew what they were thinking, and called out, "No sons will spring from their twisted seed. They will have no offspring. For centuries it was the stupid and ignorant who populated the race. This is no more. When the time comes, we shall be the mothers."

It was not enough. Their faces blew before her like angry insects. She waited until they had no hope, until bitterness made their mouths black holes, then she called out the promise that would feed their strength and kindle their desire.

"This I will tell you. Before the winter, all the young males will be divided equally among the sisterhood in all the camps. These hold no blame. They will sire the new race, our race, and its children will be born from our wombs. Did you think us destined always to walk with unfilled bellies? Or filled with nothing but the black rock of hatred?

"Now, look without envy, upon the captive women. Pleasure they will have now, but the fruits of it will be denied them. They will be the barren. We are the earth mothers, and from the awful lust of our hatred, we shall bring forth a new race."

Listening, the women cried out in exultation. *"Women are the creators,"* they yelled, *"The Bundu,*

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*the She-Devil has delivered us";* but she looked at them quietly, saying, "You have delivered yourselves, and I am delivered in you."

It was later that morning that the captives arrived. Migma and Hesta stood watching as the jeeps approached. The women stood in a circle, heads thrown back, their minds filled with new pride. Behind them, the men were lined up by the fires. They looked away, embarrassed by their eagerness, each trying to hide his face from the others.

It was Delstara . . . Lounze! When she saw her, Migma almost cried out. Lounze, who had initiated her so long ago. Controlling herself, she walked slowly to greet them. Migma, herself, took charge of the new captives, and when she was finished she returned to her own hut, where Delstara and Hesta waited.

Hesta nodded and left, and already Migma felt the other woman's strength. Delstara hadn't changed much with the years. Her cheekbones were sharper, and her black hair graying, but her air of control made Migma feel suddenly as if she were a novice again. Delstara stretched out her hands. Her shrewd eyes missed nothing, and since her conversation with Hesta she knew what to look for, and directed the conversation until she was certain.

"I'm proud of you," she said.

Migma turned her face toward the window.

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Of course I am, of course."

"You don't act it," Delstara said softly.

Migma's hands were shaking. Something was wrong somewhere. She felt confused. Surely, surely, she thought, Delstara must know how overjoyed she was to see her, how good it was, after all those years. Her face softened, and the other woman smiled. "That's better," she said.

"What?"

"I can see it in your face now—that you're glad."

"But I don't . . . I can't show my feelings any more." She blushed. It was difficult to talk about how she felt even to Hesta, much less Delstara whom she hadn't seen in so long. "It's not . . . natural for me to show my feelings," she said.

"Nonsense. You've been taught to control your emotions, Migma, but you still have them. They're frozen," Delstara said, more softly, "But they'll thaw."

Suddenly Migma turned on her. "I don't want them to," she cried. "I'm happy the way I am." Tears were on her eyelashes. Angrily she turned her face away.

"Migma?"

"Yes?"

"It was necessary, in the beginning, that you close yourself off, but now you must relax somewhat. Talk with someone, and be yourself when you get the chance. A safety valve, so to speak."

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"Small talk? Discuss the weather? No thank you, I don't need that sort of thing." Migma was being unfair, and she knew it. Delstara made her look up, and when she tried to turn away, the older woman's eyes forbade it.

"The Bundu had to be hate-full, severe," she said, "to protect herself and the others in the beginning. Thoughts of the past and sentimentality could have betrayed us into weakness and self-pity. But a stone goddess can't lead the women now. You must allow yourself more leeway, talk with Hesta now, become more pliant.

"Your dealings with the others will remain the same, but the women will taste the change, and be drawn to you the more. This is an order, Migma."

"An order? How?" she asked. How to let down when your whole being was tuned like a tightrope-walker?

"It will happen of its own accord," Delstara said. "Only let it." Then, more brusquely, "Well, it's time for you to choose an overseer from among the men. With the additional women, there'll be more work for everyone. Do you know of anyone offhand?" She spoke nonchalantly while Migma turned toward her, startled.

"A male? Why a male?" She couldn't keep her voice even. "A male? Why not one of the women?"

Delstara sat down. "We're starting the second step in the over-all plan," she said. "The captives are to be strictly controlled as before, but slowly we must unlearn hatred. The time is coming when creation will be upon us. Hate must not fit us so well that we are unable to throw it off. The men will work better with another man over them."

But Migma interrupted. "Unlearn hate?" It was a part of her now, she thought. It beat through her veins instead of blood.

"The old phase of attack is over, Migma." Delstara's eyes were half-closed, and her voice soft now. "Soon we will bear children. They will be rigorously trained, severely disciplined. But they must be free from hate. The task we have set ourselves is a difficult one, but it must be accomplished. Creation is not a kind act. It is an act of cruelty, true. But when it is completed, hate has served its purpose." She waited, then. "You know of an overseer. I see it in your face."

"No! I don't know of anyone at all."

"He must be respected by the others, aloof by nature."

"No . . . The men, they're stupid here."

Delstara's voice was steady. "Migma, you have to do it, make one of them an overseer. And I know you have someone in mind. Choose him – first thoughts are often best ones."

"I tell you I don't–" She turned

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and stared out the window at the campgrounds. Yet wasn't he the only one who could control them? Her hands trembled—to put him in a position where she had to see him every day . . .

"Give him his orders in the morning," Delstara said.

Delstara left that night, and later Migma and Hesta stood outside the main hut, watching the grounds. "I'm supposed to . . . talk with you," Migma said, belligerently.

"Oh?"

"Delstara ordered me to relax, open up." She looked away. "It was the hardest order I've been given, I think."

"I know. I told her it was time."

"You? What are you talking about?" Migma looked at her in amazement. "What do you mean, *you* told her?"

Hesta grinned, but her face was hard-set. "Why do you suppose a psychologist is attached to every camp? Our emotions are important. Everything we do hinges on how we feel about different situations. I was here to protect you from the wrong emotional climate, to say the right things at the right time. I'm supposed to help you do what you have to do. But I couldn't do it myself."

"I didn't know I was being . . . watched!" Migma stared straight ahead. This was the reason for Delstara's visit, then. She had come to check with Hesta. "Delstara?"

"She came to see you, not me, if that's what's bothering you. I'm important only in my relationship to you. I told her that your control was perfect, but suggested that you begin the second phase of training."

Migma's face flushed. Did Hesta sense more than this? "What else did you tell her?"

"Nothing. Was there anything else to tell?"

"Of course not." Migma bit her lips. "I'm to choose a male overseer—a male, mind you. Have you any suggestions?" She knew, before she asked, what Hesta's answer would be.

"It's up to you, of course." Hesta looked away. "I think the leader of the attack would be the man for the job. He's the only one with enough guts."

The rope was tightening. Somehow or other, Hesta knew. Migma could tell by her voice. Probably Delstara knew. "I suppose you're right," she said. Had Hesta smiled in the darkness? She couldn't tell. "Only . . . only I feel . . . oddly about him," she said, defiantly.

Hesta nodded. "That's why he's the man." That was all, but suddenly Migma saw it. They knew . . . knew that her weakness would be her strength; his very attraction for her would be the control assuring that she would drive him hard.

"Bring him to my hut in the morning," she said.

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## IX

Migma was ready when he came. "You aren't very tall," she observed coldly.

"No."

"Do you think you can handle a group of men?" Her tone was purposely insulting.

"Yes," he said. His spinach-green eyes were steady.

"You are being made overseer over the men. From now on you'll be held responsible for their work. Naturally you will not be given a gun. It's time to begin the spring plowing. Have you ever done farm work?"

"No. I was an artist," he said and she threw back her head. "An artist. Great help that is! Well, you'd better learn to plow." She had known someone before, long ago, who had been an artist. Who was it? Who? She wondered if he noticed the fine shape of her head. She turned her profile toward him then, realizing what she was doing, she snapped, "That's all. You're dismissed. Hesta will give you orders, and you can expect me to inspect the men's work daily."

She glared at him but he just nodded and she swept back inside the hut, refusing to stand there and watch him leave. He was gone when she turned, and a sudden panic made her breathless.

Perhaps they had overestimated her strength; perhaps she had overestimated it. There had been a tension between them all the time. Surely he was aware of it.

Her attention was diverted by the returning hunters, displaying their spoils for the day. She watched them with a new fondness, knowing suddenly that her weakness was not hers alone; that they were victims of the same need, and in some sympathetic transformation, she felt closer to them because of it.

Overnight the work speeded up under Rob's direction. There was new freedom in the men's laughter. They joked more often. Only Harry glared at Rob as he worked, but the higher he rose, the lower he'd fall, he thought, and took time out to pick his teeth.

Spring plowing had begun and every day Migma walked out to inspect the fields. She lifted her head defiantly, strode arrogantly among them, avoiding Rob's eye all the while.

He knew she dreaded it, because he dreaded it too. Yet each day he waited until her swift moving figure appeared. He didn't even give himself the satisfaction of looking up, but he couldn't relax until she had gone.

Each night the men and women captives sat before their huts watching the dusk float like a gray river over the campgrounds. Small fires burned. The men and women spoke in soft tones. They were tired, the men, but content now, with the women by their sides, and a hut to themselves, and a hearthfire.

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It was later, when all the fires were out, that Istar slipped down to the river. Since Harry and Agar had been caught, she was doubly cautious, frightened so that she listened to every sound before she placed one foot before the other. And now they had so little time, so little, she thought.

In the winter the other young males would come, and Willie, like them, would be forced to mate, and their time together be over. When she saw him she could scarcely smile. They lay together a long time, and much later, when they stood behind the huts ready to separate, Willie stopped, listening.

A furtive figure crept ahead of them in the darkness. "Wait here," Willie said, and added, "Better give me your gun."

The audacity of Harry's plan made him smile to himself. He had intended waiting until April but it was all he could take, he thought, seeing Rob lord it over him, shouting orders, and now was the time to set things right. He crept along the ground, hugging the huts. It was only a week ago that he had been given permission to live with one of the captive women, and automatically received a hut for himself. That had been an important part of his plan. It was easier to sneak away.

He supposed he could escape if he wanted to—but escape to what? barren hills, with not enough grub to eat, running like a dog? Oh, no, he'd take over what was already here. What good was freedom, if you starved?

Migma's hut was close now. He stiffened, listening. Did he hear someone? He swung around. Nothing. A squirrel, maybe. He hugged his rifle. It had taken him three weeks before he found an opportunity to steal it, but this move would repay him for years of failure, and he had planned it well. His hands shook as he contemplated the power he would hold after tonight, and he giggled again, thinking of Rob with his nice soft job gone.

He had heard something! Just as he turned, Willie dashed back in the shadows. He waited, breathlessly, wondering what Harry was up to, and followed as closely as he dared. Two guards paced before the Bundu's hut, but he and Harry were behind it. Willie stood, uncertain.

Was Harry going to attack her? Should he shoot? No, he decided, not without making sure. He watched the man edge himself up toward the small back window, held motionless by his own horror. If he interfered, they'd find out about him and Istar!

Migma slept soundly. She smiled in her sleep, one hand slung over the edge of the bed. Harry leapt from the window, slapped his hand over her mouth and pinned her to the bed. The guards, the guards, Willie thought. Surely they'd hear

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the scuffle! Migma woke up, frightened. She bit Harry's hand. He cursed and let go for a second, but she didn't have time to scream before his hand came down again, hard. Willie stared at the door through the open window, his mind yelling for the guards.

If he shot . . . if he had to shoot, they'd be sure to question him; he wasn't supposed to be out at night; they'd find out about Istar. With a groan, Willie realized it was her gun he held. If he saved Migma, would he be condemning Istar? The guards—why didn't they come?

Migma was struggling now. Her hand flew out. She screamed once. Harry was on top of her again, but now the guards were running in from outside. When he heard them, Harry grabbed Migma and stood her in front of them. His rifle was at her back.

"Stop, or I'll shoot your precious Bundu," he yelled. He didn't want to kill her unless he had too. He only wanted to force her to give up her control. The faces of the women were white. They muttered among themselves.

Harry grew impatient. "Throw your guns down, throw them down," he screamed, all his pent-up bitterness savoring their confusion and his own power. The guards hesitated and looked to Migma.

She saw his plan. He would ruin everything she had built before the women finally destroyed him. But if he killed her, the women would rise in vengeance, immediately, and slay him before further harm was done. "Shoot him," she ordered. In the back of her mind there was a protesting whimper, but she looked at them straight and repeated the order. "Kill him."

But behind them, Willie saw Harry's finger tighten on the trigger. In desperation, the boy aimed at the center of Harry's back. The recoil of the gun sent him reeling. He fell from the window. Istar was behind him. "Quick," he said. "Run around front with the others. They'll never notice you in the confusion. Here, take the gun." She ran around to the side of the hut, and Willie dashed into the bushes. He had never killed a man before.

Inside, they gathered around Harry's body. His eyes opened once and closed. Their faces floated before his vision like cloud-mists everywhere descending, and in that last flicker of consciousness, he felt finally vindicated. Only for the barest instant did he wince in regret before his identity was swept away.

No one knew who had fired the decisive shot. Istar stood with the others, and ran with them to the back of the hut. Willie was gone by then. In the confusion no one went on a chase. They gathered around Migma, screaming their triumph. Hesta quieted them and pretended not to notice when Migma slipped out alone, heading for the river.

The water was shock-cold. Fran-

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tically she undressed and threw herself in the river where it was shallow by the shore. It was somehow imperative that she cleanse herself of the odor of Harry's male body, the horror of the struggle, the sweaty, heavy smell of fear.

Feeling calmer, she sat down by the shore. Idly her fingers pressed back as her arms supported the weight of her body. Something cold touched her hand, and absentmindedly, she tossed it up and down in her hand like a ball. It was a button. She put it in her pocket as she dressed and started back for camp.

Hesta was waiting, and Migma looked at her, frowning. "I'm too tired to talk tonight."

"Migma, I think Willie shot Harry."

"Willie?" The weariness was gone. "How could he? No gun. And he's not supposed to be out anyway."

Hesta waited a minute and sat down. "I saw Istar run around from the back of the hut, later, after Harry was killed. And I don't think she could bring herself to kill anyone . . . I wouldn't be surprised if she and Willie were having an affair."

Willie and Istar. Migma remembered the button she had found, and took it out of her pocket. In the light they recognized it immediately as belonging to a woman's deerskin suit. Migma's eyes softened with sudden understanding. Only later did she realize how different was her reaction from what it would have been a year ago. Hesta saw it and smiled.

"He's going to be mated anyway. I guess he wanted to choose his own."

Migma nodded, troubled. The other women must not know, she decided. It would be too much for them to bear now, with the captive women flaunting themselves. "Keep it quiet," she said. "Istar and Willie will continue to be cautious, as long as they think their relationship's still a secret. Later in the season, nearer the arrival of the young males, we'll tell the women."

She was too tired now to think. Hesta left, and Migma stood staring at the window. Always, always, of late, there was the image of Rob to be conquered before she could sleep.

## X

Migma stood watching the men file back to the campgrounds. Rob was the last one to come in from the fields. He turned back once, with his head tilted and his hand up, protecting his eyes from the sun. Soon sunny corn, tomatoes, crunch-green cabbages and lettuce would rise victoriously above the rest of the neglected land.

Working so close to the earth had given Rob a different kind of satisfaction from any he had known. He glanced at the land possessively;

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it had been dry, cold, weed-ridden before he had turned up the undertufts to sun. It was a different sort of landscape he had created now, he thought, a patch of land with depth, color, odor and texture, but more than this; a landscape that would continue to re-create itself when he had gone.

As he came closer to the fence, he saw Migma. Her black wind-blown hair whipped about her face, and she was looking toward the fields with fierce satisfaction.

She was a fire-stone. He would have liked to paint her then. As he passed she looked up, feeling the recognition in his eyes, the half-understanding. Instinctively the emotion swept away from his face, but she had seen it. Suddenly she refused to let it close against her.

"Wait," she called. The words shocked her. What did she want to see him for? What? The fields, she thought, of course, the fields. "The fields," she said. "I want to check the men's work."

"Of course," was all he said. They walked slowly together past the campgrounds. He was conscious of the sweep of her thighs, the whisper of wind through her tangled hair. From the corner of his eye, he felt the vein in her throat beating furiously.

What could she say? Her panic grew as the huts disappeared in the distance. A ridiculous thought! Suppose . . . Suppose she turned back, the campgrounds continued to recede, disappeared beautifully, atom by atom. Suppose, if she swung around now, they would be gone.

With terrified certainty she knew she was no longer herself. Even her fears were not her own. They had not told her, she thought, that it would be like this—that all her reality, her personality would belong to them.

But the campgrounds! Shaking, she turned. "Oh, thank God!" The cry was instinctive. She leaned, for a moment, on Rob for support. Real and clear the huts stood out in the fading light. She could even make out the figures of the women moving by the early night fires. Their strength flowed out to her; she moved away from Rob and walked a little ahead of him.

"Do you still want to inspect the fields? It's growing dark," Rob said, having seen the terrible need for reassurance that had made her turn.

But the momentary insight into her possession by the witchhood led her to defiance. They would not control her. It was she who was Bundu! "Of course I want to inspect the fields. It's what I came for, isn't it?"

Rob nodded without speaking. He wished suddenly that she'd make up her mind, but she swept ahead of him to the cucumber patch. "Have these been thinned?" she asked, walking quickly between the furrows so that he was forced to follow. Her feet were small. He

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watched them hollow out small bowls in the dirt.

"I expect this to yield a good crop," she said, feeling panicky again. He was close behind her. The field, inches away, ended, and gray patches of weed leapt up. She turned, frightened.

"What are you doing this for? You're only hurting yourself. You'll regret it, no matter what happens," he said. He was determined to give her fair warning, but she swung on him, suddenly exultant because she had made him speak.

"Blame myself? For what?" Then, realizing that he could answer if he chose, "I don't know what you're talking about. I came here to inspect your work."

He didn't speak, and his eyes never left her face. "Well, that's all, isn't it? Isn't it?" she pleaded.

His lips tightened, then he said softly, "That's all, Migma," giving her another chance, but she turned toward him. "I'm the Bundu. I'll never be anything else."

"Do you want to be?" (He'd given her a chance, he thought, almost wildly. Surely she couldn't ask for more.)

"Sometimes."

"Now?" It was an effort to keep his voice even.

"Yes, now. But not five minutes from now, or five minutes ago." She didn't want to speak, but her lips uttered the words. "Would you take me, now, if I gave my consent?"

Yes, he wanted to say. Good Lord, yes. But he said, "No," and his answer confused him more than her question. Was she pleased or disappointed? He couldn't tell. An anger was working up inside him, because she stood there speaking of it as if it were hypothetical, as if he couldn't just reach out and . . . He wanted to throw her to the ground, violently, with her head crashing against the earth, take her with a cruelty that would send them both reeling into fulfilment. Why the blasted hell was he just standing there?

"Why wouldn't you? Take me now?"

"Because there wouldn't be any joy in it," he yelled. "Because you're trying to prove something. Because I'm a man with spiritual needs as well as physical ones. You can't taunt me with the one, and withhold the other.

"I was in that survivors' camp when you and your women roasted meat, making sure the odor was carried down to the valley, when you and the women flaunted yourselves, scoffing at men's natural need until they were ashamed of it. Did you sit on top of the hill then, did you yell, 'Would you take me now if I let you?' and laugh?

"Yes, I want your body, for purely physical reasons, and more, too. For what it represents. And you want me. Do you think I don't know that? There are plenty of men down in the camp who'd leap

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at the chance. Give yourself to one of them, if that's all you want. But, by hell, you won't use me. Be the Bundul You're acting now like a slut!"

He was gone. He didn't realize that she had slapped him, or hear her cries when she threw herself on the ground. Rage made his eyes smart. His muscles throbbed. His own words beat in his mind. Somewhere in those words was his answer, his protest against not only Migma, but the women as well. He searched the remembered phrases frantically. It was important that he find the answer and hold it against further doubts.

But all he discovered was a basic sense of outrage, and a small glimmer of understanding. Nature could be cruel, he thought, and still remain beautiful, unchanged, because it destroyed, not with passion, but in answer to some immutable law. Human beings cannot disentangle themselves from their actions, as nature does. Hatred becomes a part of them, poisoning their blood.

Still he wept because he had not taken her.

Istar tried Willie's hut once more. He still wasn't there, and evening rituals would begin soon. Was it over? Really over? She sank down on the one chair, promising herself that she would only stay a minute.

Now that she was alone with no need to guard her thoughts, they toppled down upon her mind like an avalanche. Horrified, she listened to her own sobs. What if someone came to investigate? But they'd know . . . anyway before long. She saw them, the women, throwing rocks and stones, and the fires burning, and herself bound in the center. And her belly — rocks rushing at her face and belly . . . and Willie. What would they do to Willie?

Footsteps! She choked back her tears and threw herself on the floor. Migma and Hesta were outside. She could hear their voices clearly. The door opened. Willie stood there, amazed, and frantically Istar put her fingers to her lips to warn him. But he had seen them outside. Quietly, with his eyes worried, he bent down to her. "What's wrong?" She shut her eyes and shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

Minutes passed. Migma and Hesta spoke quietly. Why couldn't they go somewhere else? Anywhere else? Istar turned her face to the wall. Her sobs came again when finally the women left and moved away. "I'm pregnant, pregnant, Willie," she gasped. "Do you know what that means? What they'll do?"

"I'm glad," he said, quietly, wanting to be on record as having said it first, before worrying about the other.

"Oh, I know you are! I am too, but what will they do when they find out? With us, Willie? And..."

He took her in his arms, longing

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suddenly for his mother and the old house on Lemont Street. He wanted to take Istar there, to the clock-ticking, spice-scented kitchen; to walk in with her, the two of them like tired children after too much play, to listen to his mother's words of comfort. But the house and the kitchen and all the rooms were gone.

"We'll leave before they know," he said.

"Leave? Leave? Where will we go?"

"Anyplace. One of a million places." His eyes lit up, thinking how easily the problem could be solved. "You choose a place—anywhere—and we'll go."

"But babies...babies need things. Clothes, food. They have to be coddled." She thought of her newborn child, hungry and cold, and she and Willie helpless. "They die without proper care," she cried.

Sure, he thought, there'd be problems, big ones, but it would work out. "We'll think of everything," he said. "We'll have time to plan. We'll take it all into consideration," but the conviction was gone from his voice now. He wondered how much Istar knew about babies. He didn't know a thing. "Do you feel all right?" he asked, anxiously, trying to smile.

"Fine. I—" They broke apart. Sounds of chanting and the smell of fires made them remember the time.

"Istar. Later, at the river," he whispered, and she nodded, slipped quietly from the hut and took her place among the women.

She belonged to them. Didn't she? They'd nurtured her, fed and clothed her. Their voices swept her along with their passion. "*Women are the creators, the creators,*" they chanted, and she snapped back to herself, imagining their fury turned upon her in envy.

All the way down to the river she worried. The night was soft. They lay cradled in each other's arms, she and Willie, and when Istar returned to her hut, Willie waited impatiently for morning. When Rob woke up, Willie knocked at his door.

When he told him, Willie spoke quickly, stumbling over the words, watching Rob's face for his reaction. And what could he say, Rob wondered, what words could he use that weren't banal? "I'll help you," he said, "somehow"—and suddenly he felt that his own decision was made for him. They would leave together, he and Willie and Istar. There would be no time, in the fury of preparation, to think of Migma.

All that day he made plans and discarded them. The morning was tinged with nostalgia, as if he were already gone, and remembering. He even missed Harry, and mused that perhaps through the centuries, civilization had grown into a sort of Harry Okra, fighting for its own destruction with the same obsessive

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desire that had driven Harry to his death. Perhaps it was the only way it knew to purge itself.

He didn't think so. But another part of his mind answered. The earth is green, now, it said. But first you plowed and hoed and dug, staked the heart of the land with wood and steel. Istar is carrying Willie's child. This is birth, but first there was a breaking down of defenses, a ripping through. A pain, first, and the child will rip the tissues of its mother's womb.

He thought of Migma, wondering if, after all, she and the women weren't Nature personified, working with the only tools that nature understands.

XI

Istar sat with her back to the river, looking up at the camp. She wondered if they would ever be able to return, once they left, if someday she and Willie and the child could walk up the hill and be welcomed, and be part of it once more.

Willie and Rob were talking. She listened with half an ear to the conversation, thinking how much she would miss it all, the women, the hum of activity, the rituals, the sense of purpose.

"Istar's on guard tomorrow. I suppose we could leave then," Willie said and Istar looked up.

"No, no! Not that soon," she cried.

"Why not?" His face was flushed. If they had to leave, wasn't it better to go and get it over with?

"But I have to ... plan, think of the things to take, the things a baby needs and gather them up one by one, before we leave." She made small, futile gestures with her hands. "We can't just ... go, without knowing where we're going, or what we're going to do."

Willie's face fell. He supposed she was right, but he didn't want to wait, to have time to look around and remember.

"Rob, if we do decide to wait ... I'm not saying we will, but *if* we do," Willie said, with a look to Istar, "will it be all right with you?"

Rob nodded slowly, considering. It would give them more time to plan, he thought, but still he struggled against a feeling of a chance missed.

"We'll have to go then, though," Willie said. "We can't wait until it's obvious." He felt angry, annoyed at his own relief. "You know that, there isn't any turning back," he said, to Istar, as if it were her fault.

"I know it," she murmured, hurt, and he muttered, "I'm sorry," wishing that his child didn't have to be born an outcast, that it would be born here, in a society, not in the wilderness, like an animal. "Where are you going?"

He looked up. Rob was leaving. "Back to camp. Take good care of Istar," Rob said, grinning.

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But for the next few days, the thought of leaving was uppermost in Rob's mind. He filled his thoughts with planning so that the image of Migma could not intrude.

It was like pulling down shades to keep out an electric storm.

She came, once, with her chin high and her eyes cold, to inspect the fields. She stood silently behind the men, watching them work; she snapped orders, belittled them, and the men muttered among themselves. Before, they had been accustomed to her scorn; now, with women of their own, it rankled against their newly acquired self-respect.

When he could stand it no longer, Rob went up to her.

"You're making the men nervous," he said, softly. "Is that what you want?"

"Does it make any difference what I want?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets, staring at her. "Pull yourself together," he said, and she turned swiftly, and walked away.

Rob didn't know when he made the decision not to leave with Istar and Willie; was it when she stood there, raging at the men, jeopardizing so much and not caring, or when she turned and left? He had seen the panic in her eyes. He knew only that now he could not leave until the conflict within her was resolved; until she left with him, or was content to remain the way she had been, before.

He told Willie only that he had changed his mind. And Willie fidgeted, not meeting Rob's eye. "You know we want you," he said. "It isn't... because of Istar, is it?"

Rob grinned, and shook his head, knowing that the girl was at least partly responsible. If Migma wouldn't leave with him, he wanted to go alone.

"We'll sure miss you," Willie said, but suddenly the exodus assumed all the attributes of an exciting pilgrimage. He saw himself fending for Istar, bending over her protectively. The baby would be a boy, he thought. He would teach him to fish and hunt.

"You're sure?" he asked, guiltily, and Rob said Yes, he was sure, and No, he wouldn't change his mind, and wondered all along if he was making the right decision.

When Istar came, Willie's eyes were shining. "Rob's changed his mind. He's not coming," he said, breathlessly, and Istar said, "Why not?" and looked worried, and sat down on the river bank.

"He's going to help us anyway—now we can leave as soon as you want. We don't need too many things, Istar. Can't you get them together quickly?" He listened to the impatient rustle of the trees, the rushing of the river. Their urgency quickened his blood. "You're on guard tonight. We could leave tonight!"

"Tonight? *Tonight?*" She looked at the huts and the fires, heard the

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distant murmur of the women's voices.

"Or tomorrow. We could go then."

"Oh, no, not so soon." Se could hear the guards, moving back and forth, chatting quietly between themselves.

"Sure we can. That will give you time to get everything together. Only the two of us, Istar. We'll have a place of our own—I'll build it myself. And later, when the baby comes, we'll have a real home."

"And a cradle. You could make a cradle."

"Yes, and a table to eat off of, with chairs, and two windows instead of one—"

"And a garden. We could have a garden, too." His enthusiasm was contagious. She smiled despite herself. A garden. And she could make the house look as much like the old ones as possible; put pine on the chairs, like covers, and grow flowers in a box on the window sill. "All right, all right," she said. "Tomorrow. We'll leave tomorrow." Her eyes sparkled.

You had to give something up some time, didn't you?

The next day she collected everything that they would need. They still wanted another gun, but it was too hard to sneak a rifle from the supply kit, so she settled on a pistol. It didn't even bulge in her pocket. The women trusted each other, and she wasn't challenged.

It was almost dark.

On the other side of the campgrounds, small fires burned by the captives' huts. The air was humid. A thin fog whispered up from the river. She smelled it thankfully. They could creep beneath it, and hardly be seen.

It was more than curiosity that made Hesta ask the guard what Istar had wanted in the supply hut. There was something in the girl's figure as it hurried away in the darkness—an anxious determination that struck a chord in Hesta's mind.

The guard looked up. "Why she was on an errand for you," she said, and Hesta forced herself to smile. "I'd forgotten," she laughed, with her mind working quickly. She noted the direction in which Istar disappeared, and hurried toward the gate. If her memory served her correctly, Istar was on guard tonight, she thought, and there was no need to take chances.

She doubled the guards, ignoring the small fury of inquiry, and went immediately to Migma.

"I bet she's pregnant," Hesta said. "And they'll be scared to death if she is. They don't know that we've known of the affair all along."

"Quick, go after them," Migma ordered, then "No," she said, dully. "It won't work. If they saw one of us, they'd panic.... The first child—the first of the new race. Hesta, we've got to think of something. Even if their escape isn't successful, it would be known, and I'd have

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to punish them for camp morale."

Hesta was waiting quietly, saying nothing.

Migma was suddenly white. There was only one person that Willie really trusted, one person that could carry the message, tell them it was all right. But she couldn't face him again. Yet she knew she would. There was nothing else to do.

"Get Rob," she said, "Hurry."

"They're running away," she began immediately. "Istar and Willie are running away. Rob, you've got to stop them. They're leaving tonight."

He stared at her. He had seen them only this morning. Surely they hadn't intended to leave so soon? "What do you want me to do about it?" He stood across the room from her.

"Find them. Tell them it's all right, that we've known about them all the time. Don't you understand? They don't have to leave. The baby can be born here.

"You must know their plans. I know you do!" She was frantic.

He shook his head. "They must have changed them since I saw them last." How far away were they? he wondered; how much of a head start did they have? Was Migma telling the truth—and even so, maybe it would be better to let them leave, not tempt them to stay.

"Please, I'll do anything. But get them back! Quickly, before their escape is discovered. Their baby will be the first of the new race. I'll do anything, Rob."

He had already made up his mind, at least to let them know they could return, if they chose. But when she spoke, he grabbed her shoulders suddenly, staring at her.

"Anything, Migma?"

"Yes, yes." She was trembling.

"Let me leave, then." He let her go. "I'll want a rifle. It's all I had when I came, and all I'll take with me."

"No. No, I won't do it." But what else could she do? "All right. I promise, only hurry, hurry," she sobbed. "Find them."

She stood there watching him leave. The promise had been forced from her. Was she bound to honor it? Was she? And then, wildly, suppose he didn't come back at all?

And further south, down the river, Willie and Istar hurried along in the sucking darkness. They had dashed to the river as soon as Istar discovered that extra guards had been ordered at the gate. The mud was thick now, the brambles wet, and they grabbed rocks and bushes to keep their balance.

Behind them, Istar knew that fires would be dying for the night, and her eyes still held the image of the women talking quietly, and the huts huddled so closely together on the hilltop. Willie grabbed her hand. She laughed with forced gaiety, and the river and the wet darkness enclosed them.

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There was no chase. They heard nothing behind them, only silence, the rushing of water, and the gurgle of mud that pulled at their boots and splattered their ankles. Even the excitement of pursuit would have heartened them, sharpened their purpose. They were wet, and their arms scratched by brambles.

Well, that was that. He sure was glad they got away all right, Willie said, and Istar nodded. It sure was good, he said, to be alone for once, and not have to worry all the time. It sure was, she said. Then they were quiet again, embarrassed, not knowing quite how to act. They were both frightened, not only of the river darkness, but of themselves.

Both of them felt banished, slightly hurt because no attempt was being made to bring them back. They were lonely by themselves. Willie wondered where his enthusiasm was gone. Istar wanted to confess her confusion, but was afraid.

And behind them, Rob followed along the river bank. As soon as he had found Willie's room bare he had thought of the river. Tall weeds twined themselves around his boots. He slipped on the mud-slick shore, and twice he waded out into the water. Each branch he pulled away snapped back, bruising his face and ripping his clothing. Here and there he caught sight of footprints, and learned, from their tracks, that they had left the shore and taken to the water.

Had he missed them? Walked by the place where they had come back on the bank, without noticing? Did he hear voices? He stopped. He could hear the water lapping at his feet, the scamper of rabbits, the gutteral growl of frogs that sat unconcerned on wet rocks. The river changed direction. There was a rustle, the sound of footsteps. He cupped his mouth with his hands.

"Willie, it's me, Rob," he shouted.

They had been resting on a small patch of grassy ground. A knapsack was thrown by the bank. "It's Rob," he called again, and Willie crept cautiously out of the bushes.

"You're alone, sure?" he asked, all eyes, anxious, and Rob nodded.

Istar came out then.

"Did they find out? Are they after us?" Willie asked, and Rob caught the mingled hope and fear in his voice.

"Would you want to go back if you could?"

Now they were cautious. Willie didn't want Istar to think he was a coward, so he shrugged. "Well, I don't know," then, because he couldn't help himself, "Could we? Go back?"

Rob nodded slowly, watching their faces. "They know about you two. They have all along."

"They know!" Istar couldn't believe it. All the worry, the fear of being discovered—and all the time they knew!

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"And they want you back. Quickly, before the other women discover you're gone. Only Migma and Hesta know."

Istar was on her feet. "Do you mean it, Rob? And no punishment? Nothing?"

"Not if you get back before your escape is noticed by the others," he said, and hesitated. "If you'd rather go on by yourselves, I'll say I couldn't find you."

They looked at each other. "It would be easier ... with the baby and all," Willie said, not wanting to appear too anxious, and Istar grinned. "Yes, for the baby. For the baby's sake. What do you think, Willie?"

So the child was their excuse. They justified their desire to return, and happily let themselves be led back toward the camp. Willie and Istar chatted, shifted their plans for the new circumstances. Only Rob was quiet. He wondered what had happened to the boy Willie who had stood beside him not too long ago, eagerly accepting the dangers of unknown country for adventure.

He told himself that he was the one who was out of place. Willie and Istar were young people being received into their society. Who was he to advise them to live apart from it? He shrugged, trying to take pleasure in their delight, and thought that in years to come they would be surrounded by their children, venerated as founders of the new race.

When finally they arrived at the camp, the morning fires were burning, and they slipped into Migma's hut to wait until the rituals were over. Istar was shivering, but when the Bundu came, she leapt up, and Rob watched as Migma led Istar to the women.

She motioned for silence. The women looked at each other, wondering, and only when Willie took his place next to Istar, did they begin to understand.

"Gather round me and listen," Migma called. "Our triumph is at hand. Already Istar has conceived of the young male, Willie. And before long, your own wombs will listen for life! Look at Istar and taste your own triumph.

"From the black core of our hatred, we have forced creation. The time of hate is over. We must cleanse ourselves of rage lest it consume us! The members of the new race must not know vengeance. When the old generation dies, hatred will be unknown on the face of the earth.

"Rise and do honor to Willie and Istar; they are Adam and Eve without original sin. Women are the creators, the creators. See your handiwork, the seed of the new era!"

*"Women are the creators, the creators,"* they shouted. Their eyes consumed Istar, searching for signs of her state. Again, Migma thought triumphantly, the time was right. Only a few months ago

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they would have muttered with envy.

The air was filled with chanting. Each woman thought of her own womb, filled; of children growing up without the threat of war; each resolved that the first seed of dishonesty would be plucked out and destroyed utterly, so that hate could never deceive mankind again.

But Migma rushed back to her hut. From outside came the sound of the women's voices. They sang quietly now, old lullabies and soft evening songs, these women who had so lately been filled with hate. Migma thought of them, wondering that they had found the transition so painless. Hate. Without it she would feel vacant. An unrest was at her, a disquiet. She was still staring out at the campgrounds, when Hesta came in and closed the door.

"Migma?"

"What do you want?" It was the first time Migma had neglected morning inspections and they both knew it. Hesta was a hound, Migma thought, sniffing the odor of her desire, patiently burying each individualistic craving. You couldn't lock her out, or ignore the quiet authority, the purposely soothing, calm eyes.

"You look tired," Hesta said, her observant gaze resting on the chestnut beads where they lay on the table, unworn. "Not yourself," Hesta said, mildly disapproving.

"Myself? What's myself? I have no self."

"You'll come through all right. You've conquered worse than this." Migma was a child. Hesta's voice was soothing. It was Delstara's voice and the voice of all the women combined.

"You can't make me do anything I don't want to do!" Migma sat up suddenly, glaring. "You can't. Do you hear me? So don't try."

Hesta's solicitous smile broadened into a grin. "You sure as hell are hard to handle when you get like this. You always were," she said, and immediately Migma felt better.

"You think you know me like a book, don't you?"

"No. But you'll come through all right."

"Come through what?" Migma demanded.

"This . . . man episode. You have to feel desire again. Otherwise you'll grow too apart from the other women. And the identification has to be complete, Migma, from your side as well as theirs."

Migma just stared at her. Could you beat it? It was a riot, a positive riot! They *wanted* her to . . . feel the way she did. The hound had discovered her secret long ago. She laughed until her belly hurt.

"Oh, my God, and I was . . ."

"Hush, Migma."

"Thinking how alone I was . . ."

"It's all right."

"Forsaken, and that no one knew."

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"Hush."

Migma's head snapped up. Now her voice was hard. "And you were watching me all the time, weren't you?"

Hesta flushed and Migma said, "Well, weren't you?"

"Of course not. Not that way. What do you think I am, a watchdog?"

My God, that was it, Migma thought. Not a hound, but a lean thoroughbred watchdog, steel-eyed and sleek, slipping on grease-padded claws. "Yes, yes, a watchdog," she yelled. "Sniffing me out, pawing my thoughts, turning me over and over."

"Migma . . . you had to unlearn hatred. Desire was the only way."

Migma turned her back and stared out the window. Hesta hesitated, then, "Did you have to make a deal with . . . him, in return for Willie and Istar's return?"

Migma didn't answer. Hesta smiled. "It can't be that bad." She frowned. "Unless . . ." and Migma spun around.

"No. I didn't bed with him if that's what you mean!"

"Of course not."

"What do you mean, of course not? I didn't because he wouldn't have me, if you want to know. He's a man, with more than physical needs," she mimicked. "Well, isn't that funny? A riot? He told me to lay with someone else, if that was what I wanted. He told *me* that—your precious Bundu—doesn't that make you want to split a gut? Well, doesn't it?"

"Stop it. You're hysterical." Hesta slapped her, hard, and Migma quieted. "He made me promise to let him leave," she said, almost pleading.

But Hesta shrugged. "He's served his purpose. It's as good a way as any to get rid of him. We couldn't have him around all the time to remind you."

"It wouldn't bother me in the least," Migma said, coldly.

"It wouldn't? Why, you're afraid to face him, even now."

"Am I? Am I?" Migma turned, white-faced. She made the decision that quick. She was out of the hut in an instant, the swiftness of her movement knocking the chestnut beads from the table to the floor.

## XII

The March wind was swift, strong. Migma felt pleasure in the violence of its touch upon her cheek. Triumphantly, she realized she was through with fighting. What actually kept her from running away with him? Nothing, nothing.

The wind swept past her, anxious to be on its way, impatient, she thought, as she was impatient. It was time for the men to come in from the fields. She ran past them, laughing, not caring if they saw her.

The women followed her with

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their eyes, wondering. They stopped work. The huts emptied in seconds. Heads popped out doors, hands flew to startled mouths, and still she ran. They saw the exultation in her face and turned, one to the other. And all the time Hesta stood with the scene before her eyes, and Migma disappearing in the distance.

Rob was still in the fields. He saw her coming. She threw herself in his arms, and stood there, feeling finally free, with the witchhood a dream, the huts unreal, and the women only statuettes in the clearing.

"We'll go away together. Tonight," she panted.

"Do you mean it? Do you?"

"Yes oh yes." Between laughter and tears now.

"You'll regret it, tomorrow or the next day."

"No, I won't. I tell you, I won't."

"You're fooling yourself."

"No, no. Not now."

He searched her face. Be cautious, be cautious, his mind warned.

"Take me, now."

But he shook his head. "Not now," he said. "Not within sight of the camp. Later, when we're on our way, when you're no longer Bundu."

*"Olive,"* she laughed. "When I'm Olive again."

He had to be sure. "Wait until morning. Give yourself until then. If you're still positive, we'll leave."

"No, no. Not morning. Now."

"If you're sure now, you'll feel the same then."

But morning could destroy her. "Now," she pleaded, but finally she laughed. What difference could one night make? "All right. Whatever you say."

"I was coming to you in the morning anyway, for my rifle. Will you put it in my hut tonight?"

"A rifle? You still don't trust me?"

"No."

Then she'd prove it to him. In the morning, she'd still feel the same. "You'll see, you'll see," she laughed, and he kissed her, and watched her leave, and looked at the fields for a final time.

When she came back to the camp grounds, everything was quiet. The fires were out for the night, and she felt like an intruder. I am an intruder, she thought, I don't belong here any more. She sat inside her hut, waiting, knowing that Hesta would come, anticipating the look on her face when she told her.

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving," she said.

"All right," Hesta answered.

"All right, is that all you have to say?"

"That's all. From now on, it's up to you. The Bundu must know her own weakness, and her own strength."

Migma turned away. "You'll have to tell them."

"Of course."

"And take care of things."

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"Someone has to."

What was she doing? She looked out the window at the huts. Was she really planning to—"Hesta, why am I doing this? Why? Good God, why am I doing it?"

Hesta stood a moment without speaking. "Maybe to prove something," she said finally.

Migma turned her head. To prove something—what? She faced Hesta, feeling the answer slowly rise up, feeling her way. "Yes," she said. "To prove something. To prove that I can do anything that I want to, that you or the women don't control me, that I'm the Bundu. That I am in control."

She remembered something that she was not permitted to remember before. "Rob, Rob was that boy in college all over again. He was an artist, too, remember? How I fought for him? And all my conditioning in the witchhood was against it? I struggled, and had to give him up.

"I had to prove that this time, I could make my own choice! I had to feel free." The knowledge was a triumph greater than she had ever known. She stood there with her eyes wide. "I'm not going," she said. "I don't have to now. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have believed me?" Hesta asked quietly.

The rifle had been where Migma had said it would be, on the floor under his bed. He looked about him once, at the pine hut, the wooden chair, and through the window, at the campgrounds. There was a loneliness in him; but an aching to be gone, too. He knew, without waiting, that by morning Migma would be the Bundu again.

No one stopped him. She had even left a knapsack of food. He grinned, picking it up, and walked swiftly away. His footsteps faltered at Willie's hut, but he went on.

The ground was soft beneath his feet. The river rushed free of ice now, and beneath him, was the spot where he had first camped. He shifted his rifle, stopping now and then to rest, to taste the spring air, and think of the hut he would build, the pictures he would paint.

His eyes were calm, contemplative, but there was a cocky tilt to his head and he whistled softly under his breath. The sound of voices drifted up and past him. Only with the aid of his memory was he able to make out the words. *"Women are the creators, the creators."*

The Bundu raised her arms triumphantly. The wind blew her black hair out from her head like a fan.

She looked down at the women with a new gentleness, a greater understanding. From all around, the cry rose up, *"Women are the creators,"* and already, from the plowed fields, small seeds pushed up to sun.

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# *The Science Stage*

*by* WILLIAM MORRISON

WHEN THE CURTAIN RISES ON THE MAKROPOULOS SECRET, the only people who don't know what the Secret is are the characters of the play. The Phoenix has gone to considerable trouble to inform everyone else that the leading lady in this revival is more than three hundred years old, and has been singing in opera for at least a century. As played by Eileen Herlie she is a mysterious and fascinating creature who lures one susceptible young man to his death and makes fools of two others not so young. Seeing that one of these gentlemen is her own great-grandson, it appears that excessively long life makes for rather bizarre complications. It does not, however, make for a very good play.

Not that THE MAKROPOULOS SECRET lacks interest. Karel Capek was an intelligent and civilized man, and his concoction of mystery, science fiction and philosophical talk is at times amusing and provocative. It is also all too often old-fashioned, dull, and as full of holes as a bad hombre who has tangled with the hero of an adult Western. Like most viewers, I don't mind a few inconsistencies in plot and character if they aren't too obtrusive. I do object when the plot fizzles out.

Towards the end of Act I, for instance, as our tricentenarian charmer is playing hard to get with her great-grandson (and I assure you that this scene leaves an audience with some peculiarly mixed feelings), a change comes over her. Knowing the Secret which she has been fighting to recover, the audience naturally assumes that a very unpleasant metamorphosis is approaching. And when great-grandson, after one look at her, starts yelling for a doctor, and she comes out with a scarf veiling her face, the audience just as naturally assumes that she is turning into an incredibly old hag, in the manner of Rider Haggard's SHE.

No such thing. Comes the next act, and she is as young and blooming as ever, apparently revived by the hormonal ministrations of the lecherous Baron Prus. And nothing more is said about the sudden emergency which sent her great-grandson screaming for medical assistance.

To make things worse, our lady spends the entire first act willing to do anything—*anything*, mind you, to get back the Secret. (This, as it happens, is written in Greek, but has the mysterious quality of being at once comprehensible to anyone



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who looks at it). When she gets it, in Act II, she decides that after three hundred years life has become a bore, and offers the precious formula to the other characters—with no takers.

Even in a play about an opera singer, this is a false note. There is some interesting discussion about whether immortality should be reserved for aristocrats or thrown to the common people. But for fear of boring the audience (unlike Shaw, who would have discussed to his heart's content, and if you were bored, be damned to you) either Capek or his adapter has restricted the talk to a few minutes.

There are other flaws, and they spoil the play. Miss Herlie, however, does a fine job of pretending that nothing is wrong, and she is ably assisted by Karel Stepanek as the arrogant Baron, and the other actors.

RUMPLE is a character who has been condemned, because of his ceasing to appear in a previously successful comic strip, to reside in Oblivia, where comic strip characters go when they come to the end of their drawing boards. A forty-eight hour reprieve gives him a chance to persuade his creator to start drawing again, and inflicts him upon Broadway.

I have long believed that no idea whatever can possibly be too silly to be the foundation for a successful musical comedy, and if RUMPLE shakes my faith in this artistic credo it is only temporarily. For the trouble here is not the idea, although that is hardly earth-shaking, it is what is done with it.

Two acts ring wearisome changes on one basic joke—that Rumple, who becomes visible to his creator, remains invisible to others, so that when the artist yells at him, they think he is yelling at them. There is also a boring and completely unfunny psychiatrist scene.

Eddie Foy is a good comedian who strains desperately for laughs and uses a few gags that should have stayed in burlesque. Gretchen Wyler and Stephen Douglass have to work so hard to so little purpose that they both must wish they were back in DAMN YANKEES working with a devil who had a sense of humor. Barbara Perry has a remarkable chassis and Lois O'Brien is a beauty contest winner, but it takes more than their talents to bring RUMPLE to life.

THE MAKROPOULOS SECRET, *by Karel Capek, in a new adaptation by Tyrone Guthrie, presented by the Phoenix Theatre, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, starring Eileen Herlie, with Karel Stepanek.*

RUMPLE, *produced by Paula Stone and Mike Sloan at the Alvin Theatre, directed by Jack Donahue, book by Irving Phillips, lyrics by Frank Reardon, music by Ernest G. Schwenkert, choreography by Bob Hamilton, starring Eddie Foy.*

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*Torremolinos is a town in Málaga, not far from Gibraltar, so small as to be absent from even fairly sizable atlases, and hitherto noted chiefly for its production of sugar. It is now of interest to s.f. readers as the latest abode of Mack Reynolds, who arrived there from Rhodes via Munich. Despite the fact that Reynolds is unquestionably the most cosmopolitan author in the field, his stories retain a characteristic American tang—as in this vigorous tale of the revival of boxing in a brutal future when the finesse of the boxer has given place to the animal power of the*

# *Gladiator*

*by* MACK REYNOLDS

THEY WERE SEATED AT AN INCONspicuous table in a corner of the I.V.S. Center Autocafe, Jennifer and Bull Wonder. Their heads were intimately close together.

I made my way between chairs and tables and as I got nearer they looked up at me, Bull's massive scarred face scowling.

Two neat and tough-looking men came to their feet and got in my way. "You can't get any nearer to the Champion. No autographs," one of them said politely. The other touched me here, there—the places a man might carry a concealed weapon.

Jennifer said, "It's only Frank Leslie. He's all right."

Inwardly I winced but I said, "Hello, Jen. Hello, Bull. What's this, a bodyguard? Is there a story in it? Who is it you're afraid of, Bull?"

He growled at me, "Not a bookworm like you, Buster. I got *man*-sized enemies."

The guards decided I was harmless and took their seats again.

Jennifer said, "Being on an alien planet like this, the Martian government thought Bull ought to be protected."

I had sunk into a seat, reporter-like ignoring the lack of invitation. "Alien planet?" I said. "How can Earth be an alien planet? Every human in the system originally stems from Earth."

"Oh, Frank," Jennifer said, "you know what I mean."

Bull Wonder said, "You trying to



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start an argument again, Buster? You know damn well I was born on Mars."

"So was I but our ancestors weren't. How any human can fail to honor his native—"

"Knock it off, will you, Buster. We've heard it over and over again. If Earth had've won the Gladiatorial Meets she would've been riding high. She didn't, so now she's whining about the respect due her as Old Mother Earth. And guys like you are suckered in."

I said, "Earth only contested the games at all because had she won she could have used her prestige to end them. The Interplanetary Meets are a degrading hangover from barbarism. If anything, a retreat from ancient civilization. Gladiator combats had practically disappeared in the American civilization of the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries, for instance."

Jennifer sighed her indication that she'd been through this before. Which she had. Only a year ago she'd been active in the movement to end the Meets and establish Solar System Government. She had drifted away, like so many others, figuring that Earth would never be able to put it over.

Now she said, "Frank, you know very well that the Meets are preferable to war. At least, only a few men are involved. The planet whose gladiators triumph dominates the others diplomatically. Would you rather millions were destroyed to determine the same thing? Mars won the last Meet. Until the next one, ten years from now, or until Bull is defeated by other than a Martian, she is the dominant Solar System power. What could be simpler?"

"Solar System government would be simpler," I said. "And more civilized."

Bull laughed. "It's always the way. The littler the guy is the more he wants civilization. He's not big enough to take what he wants so he tries to talk his way in. Same with planets. Earth's too soft, she's got too much of this ancient civilization Buster's always talking about, so she wants to argue the rest of the planets and satellites out of their power." He snorted deprecatingly.

I drew a small circle with a forefinger on the tabletop. I said, "Brute strength isn't all, Bull. You might do well enough in the arena, fighting with swords and spears in the classic manner of the Romans, but I don't think you'd do so well at, say, some of the more skilled sports of the old civilizations. I just don't believe you'd have the dexterity, the keenness of wit."

Even as I talked the red was ascending his neck like a sunrise. By the time I'd finished, he was on his feet. I had the feeling that if Jennifer hadn't been there he would have reached for me.

"Listen, Buster," he grated, "I'm Interplanetary Champ. That means

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that I'm not only bigger and stronger than you or anybody else, it also means I'm quicker, and for my money smarter. You spend a lot of time with your snoot in your ancient books but Buster, always remember this. There isn't any sport, ancient or modern, I couldn't take you at, just any time."

Jennifer had a hand on his arm and was urging him back into his chair.

But I said, "Oh, I don't know."

Jennifer chuckled—soothingly, for Bull's sake—ridiculing me. She said, "Now *really,* Frank."

Bull Wonder's voice was choked. "Listen," he rasped, "I've got up to ten thousand credits that says I can take you in any sport you can name. Past or present."

That was what I'd wanted. I said, "I'll just take a thousand of that."

A voice at my elbow said, "Like hell you will. What's going on here, Champ?"

It was one of the bodyguards, his eyes Pluto-frosty.

Before we could say anything, the guard went on. "You know our orders, Champ. No fights. No sports participation. Nothing that might lose you your championship."

Bull Wonder brushed the objection aside. "Don't be crazy, Mik. Take a look at this character. You think he's going to lick me?"

"No sports participation," the bodyguard said. To me: "Scroot, buddy."

Jennifer said, "Now don't be ridiculous. There won't be a fight, but even if there was, Frank is a Martian citizen too. Even if he did win Bull's championship, it would still belong to Mars."

"My orders are that the champ doesn't get rooked into any games while he's here on Earth. That's definite." The other bodyguard was standing beside him now; they could have been twins in their identical, expressionless appearance. Products of the new order of Mars. A new order that was as old as mankind, a heritage from his millennia in the caves.

I shrugged, "If Bull wants to call it off . . ."

Bull didn't want to call it off and he made that clear. We wound up with the five of us getting up and leaving the cafe for the headquarters of the Ancients Athletic Association to which I belonged for the past ten years. In fact, it was where I'd first met Jennifer, back when she shared my interest in early civilization—and before she met Bull Wonder.

Jennifer. The snapping eyes. The fine golden hair. The long legs. The pixy smile that was Jennifer.

One of the guards, the one Bull had called Mik, went ahead. The other brought up our rear. Heads turned and followed us as we wound our way through the tables to the door. After all, he was Interplanetary Champ. His stride told you he knew it.

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The guard Mik was saying, "All right, we'll go over and see what he has in mind. But no fight, Champ. Maybe he's only a telenews writer and maybe he's got only one chance in ten thousand of taking you, but flukes happen."

"Aw, knock it off," Bull growled. "Buster hasn't got one chance in a million of touching me."

Jennifer said in irritation, "This is so ridiculous, Frank. You know that you can't afford to lose a thousand credits."

I didn't say anything. We filed across the lobby, out to the street and took the express sidewalk heading north. After about ten miles and twenty minutes we'd reached the old section of Nueva Los Angeles and got off to take a local. Five minutes later we were before the AAA building and I used my ring key to open the door.

One of the bodyguards pressed his way in first, his hand in a side pocket. He grumbled in some surprise, "This place is so old it's dusty."

Mik had his back to the rest of us and was looking up and down the street warily. You'd think Bull Wonder was one of the gangster chiefs of the olden days in the United States. *Bootlickers,* as they were called, the meaning of the term lost in antiquity.

I led them down into the basement and into the games room. A large table was set up there with a net stretched across its middle. I picked up one paddle and handed it to Bull, took the other myself and went to the far end of the table.

Bull took the paddle in his beefy hand and wrinkled his forehead at it. He looked at one side of it, turned it over and scowled at the other.

"What the hell do you do with these?" he growled. "Beat each other over the head with them?"

Jennifer began laughing. "Oh, Frank. You *fool.* You've challenged him to ping-pong."

I said, unsmiling, "An ancient game of skill and dexterity. Let's go, Champ."

Still gurgling her laughter and overriding Bull Wonder's swelling anger, she insisted on showing him how to play. They batted the ball back and forth a half dozen times without his catching on to any extent.

We never did play. The red was creeping up his neck again. Even the bodyguards were grinning now.

Finally he tossed his paddle to the table. He said flatly, "I'll have my manager send you a check for a thousand in the morning."

"Don't forget," I said.

"Come on, Jen," he growled. "Let's scroot before Buster picks our pockets, claiming it's some old sport." He took her arm to lead her out, saying to me over his shoulder, "Don't ever get near enough to me again for me to smell you, Buster. I'm warning you." He said to the guards, "Lead on, boys."

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Mik winked at me as they left. But it wasn't a friendly wink. It was the grudging respect a person without ethics gives another who has just put one over.

"So long, Jen," I said softly.

"Goodby, Frank," she said without looking at me. Evidently Jennifer hadn't expected me to take the money.

All right. The next day I started my campaign in earnest. It was a good time for it since there was little news breaking. As Interplanetary Champ visiting Earth, Bull Wonder had already been getting considerable coverage. I upped it, not only through my own column but through every other medium I could influence. The boys know me, I've been in the news game all my life. Some of them like me and even owed me a favor or so. Largely, those who didn't could be influenced by a portion of Bull's thousand credits which I had available for bribes.

I started off easily, telling the ping-pong story in my column and pointing up Bull as a credulous Neanderthal type. All muscle, including the contents of his brain pan.

The boys lifted it from my column and ran it straight as news through almost every medium in the system.

The next day I devoted the column to an analysis of the characteristics of those who won in the Gladiatorial Meets. I let it get over that they were dull-witted brutes, so mentally deficient as to need bodyguards and managers to lead them through the problems of everyday life.

The newsmen picked that up too and ran it, along with a howl from Bull Wonder's manager that he was going to sue. A nice portion of Bull's income came from his endorsing this, that and the other product. It didn't do him any good to be held up to ridicule.

The third day there was a protest from the Martian legation against what they termed "a slanderous assault upon a prominent Martian national," and I got orders from higher up to cut it out. Of course, I was Martian-born myself, but my outlet was Terran. I had to go into the next phase of my campaign.

This part of it I didn't see myself, but it was covered completely by every news service in the game and recounting it here is almost redundant.

The boys had been trying to get Bull for comment for several days but his manager kept them out. Now, probably on suggestion from the Martian ambassador, he was going to hold a press conference.

Besides Bull, his manager Howie Johns was on hand, plus the bodyguards . . . and Jennifer.

Evidently Bull did pretty well with his temper until the last. They asked him questions about the ping-pong game and he grinned and put over the impression that he felt he'd been taken in a con game and that

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he was rueful about it, but not particularly bitter.

They asked him about my attacks on the Games and on gladiators and he let them know that although I had a right to my opinions, they didn't coincide either with his nor, he was sure, with those of the majority of the citizens of the Solar System.

They asked him if he felt there was anything personal in my attack on him and he grinned and looked over at Jennifer but refused to comment.

They asked a few more questions, some of Bull, some of Howie Johns and even one or two of Jen. But they kept the bombshell until last.

Finally Jo Pitcairn, of Interplanetary Press, an old associate of mine, asked softly, "Actually, Champ, what do you think of Frank Leslie's chances in the arena?"

Everybody laughed.

Bull grinned. "I'd like to get Frank into the arena."

So everybody laughed again.

Jo Pitcairn said, "Frank says you do all right with the sword and spear, but you wouldn't stand up at some of the gladiatorial games played in the old United States. He says he'd like to get *you* into the arena, too."

Bull's grin faded, they tell me. "Doing what—playing ping-pong?"

Jo Pitcairn pulled out his notebook and checked. "Doing . . . *fisticuffs.*"

Bull Wonder was on his feet, glowering. "What in hell is fisticuffs?"

Nobody answered. Finally Jennifer said hesitantly, "The gladiators wear light leathern mittens and beat each other about the face and body until one falls unconscious or dead. I believe there are some other rules which I forget. It was a very popular sport in ancient times."

"Is that all?" Howie Johns said in disbelief. "No swords, no missiles?"

"Why that little pipsqueak," Bull growled. "I'd beat him to a pulp."

The bodyguards were at his side, efficiently cold. "Out," they snapped to the newsmen. "Everybody scroot. The interview is over. Everybody out."

"What's wrong, Champ?" Jo Pitcairn called as they pushed him through the door. "You're not going to let him get away with it, are you, Champ?"

What went on in Bull's apartment after the newsmen were kicked out isn't quite so well known. And we didn't hear anything from Howie Johns nor the Martian Legation for two days. They were two field days for the videonews services.

Meanwhile I'd been fired by my company. That didn't last. Such a howl went up from almost every agency capable of creating a howl that they took me back on again—at a raise. Even the Solar System

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Civil Liberties League protested and they may not carry much weight on Mars any more but they're strong on Earth. I was Martian-born but here on Earth where I worked the things I stood for were pretty popular.

I deliberately hid out for the time. I knew the Martian Ambassador would be wanting to see me and I wasn't having any.

On the third day, it broke. Through Howie Johns, the Interplanetary Champion accepted my challenge to meet in the arena at the ancient sport of fisticuffs. There was a double provision. One, that all my property be wagered on the result of the game. Two, that if I lost I pledged myself never to practice journalism again. In short, Bull Wonder wanted his revenge.

Now in order for this to make sense at all I'm going to have to go a bit into detail on the rules of fisticuffs.

The meet is divided into a maximum of fifteen sessions. Each session lasts for three minutes, and following each session there is a period of one minute of rest. It is during this rest period that the gladiator's assistants may refresh him by means of a drink of woji, massage, or such encouraging suggestions as, "Get out there and kill him this time."

Only the fists can be used as offensive weapons. The opponents strike each other until one falls to the arena floor. As soon as a gladiator falls, the other must go to a neutral corner and wait there while the umpire counts off the seconds. If ten seconds elapse before the fallen gladiator is able to come to his feet again, the bout is over and the victor proclaimed.

A mild type of gladiator combat indeed, you say. However, there are ramifications.

For one thing, the arena, or *ring,* is only twenty-four feet square, allowing limited room for retreat. Leathern mittens *(gloves)* are worn and the hands are so taped that there is little hope of your opponent breaking one on the side of your head.

The fact that there are rest periods gives a false illusion since this merely allows the bout to continue at a greater tempo. No armor is worn and no clothing except brief shorts and shoes.

To be truthful, I was only moderately hopeful of success. Although my life has been largely devoted to my studies and work, I have made a practice of keeping my body fit by daily exercises. Among these, I admit, have been fisticuffs, a sport indulged in nowadays only by a few members of the Ancients Athletic Association. There, undoubtedly, I had an advantage, especially since the last known specimens of instruction books on the sport are in the AAA library.

On the detrimental side was the fact that Bull Wonder outweighed me possibly thirty pounds and was one of the most perfect physical

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specimens in the system. Nor, in spite of my jibes to the contrary, was he unintelligent. No man who has gone through an Interplanetary Meet and emerged victor could possibly be deficient in cool, cunning brainwork under the most trying of conditions. That was Bull Wonder. Two hundred pounds of efficient, acute fighting machine. The Interplanetary Champion in a system of forty billion people.

There was a period of training during which time Bull acquainted himself with the rules of fisticuffs and I built myself up as near physical perfection as possible. The two weeks lasted for all too short a time.

The day before the fight I flew with Jo Pitcairn into Nueva Los Angeles and finished up some business there, then we went on to my quarters at the arena building near Albuquerque Spaceport.

The next night the arena was packed. Largely by Martians and fans from the other planets, evidently the majority of Earthlings had no desire to see my disgrace.

Jo Pitcairn acted as my sole assistant, or *second*. Behind my little stool, in my corner of the arena, were seated a few dozen members of the Ancients Athletic Association, a dozen or so of the videonews fellows and one or two personal friends. None of them were Martians. Win or lose, no Martian was going to approve of this. Not openly, at least. As a Martian, even if by some fluke I did win the championship Mars would still hold her position of diplomatic prestige but the whole thing had an air of farce that was detrimental to Martian dignity—and Martian dignity these days stretched to the point of pomposity.

The umpire brought us out into the middle of the ring, introduced us to those watching (an ancient ritual whose purpose is unknown, since obviously everyone present knew who both of us were) and gave us our instructions. Above all, he stressed that if we fell to wrestling (a much scorned ancient sport in which the contestants wrapped arms and legs about each other and grunted) we must obey his command to separate, and if one fell to the floor the other must return to an arena corner until the ten-second time count was made.

Bull stood there scowling at me. He couldn't figure it out. If I lost, I was ruined; and even if I won, *what* did I win? The Martian government was infuriated and was sure to demand my return from Earth, and what would happen to me in Marsport was chilling just to speculate upon.

Behind Bull, in his corner, along with Howie Johns, was Jennifer. She was frowning too, worriedly. I liked to think that some of the old affection was still there.

We returned to our respective corners and waited for the bell. It clanged and we started toward each other.

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Bull must have figured that he would be shamed if I lasted through the first three-minute session. He lowered his head and rushed me furiously. I was thankful to note that he evidently had done little checking up on the sport, very little practice during the training period.

He aimed a blow at my chest that could have broken my ribs had his hand not been padded. As it was the leathern mittens made little difference anyway, since the blow didn't land.

I had turned slightly to the side, slid one of my feet back and pushed my left hand into his face. He was off balance and his head rocked with the blow.

He stepped back to shake his head and to glare at me. I grinned at him wryly and slid my left foot forward carefully, jabbed out with my left hand again. Before he knew it, I had hit him once, twice, in the face and had then stepped back.

He rushed again. And again.

My instruction books, crumbling with age, were before me. I stayed on my toes. I danced. One, two, three, slide. One, two, three, slide. When he managed to touch me with one of his wild blows, I rolled with it, avoiding the worst of the punishment.

And always my left hand flicked out to his face. Over and over again. But with no noticeable effect, thus far.

He stopped finally, faced me, his feet planted apart deliberately, his hands only half raised. He was boiling with fury.

"Stop and fight," he bit out. "Stop and let me kill you."

My game was to infuriate him still further. "Neanderthal," I said, grinning. "This isn't exactly ping-pong, is it, Bull?"

He was after me again. I stepped to the side, flicked my left hand out once, twice. Danced away.

The session was over before I could believe it. I returned to my stool and let Jo Pitcairn fan me with a towel as they had done in the old days.

I could see the disbelief in Jo's face.

He said, "You know, Frank, for the first time I think you might have a chance. Before, it made a damn good story. But now I think you might have a chance. Holy smokes, Frank. The full significance of it is just beginning to hit me. You might win!"

Using ancient idiom, I said, "My pal." My breath wasn't even coming hard as yet. I felt pretty good. More confident than when I'd begun.

"Give me credit," he protested cheerfully. "I'm still the only man in the system that thinks so. Should I start passing our secret around?"

"No. Not yet. He's got to be exhausted. The only way I can win is to stop dancing and slug it out with him, toe to toe. I can't do that until he's used up the strength in that gorilla body."

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The bell rang and Bull was dashing across the ring at me, still furious and strong. The crowd screamed its excitement.

It was the same as the round before. *One, two, three, slide,* I whispered to myself. Up on the toes. Dance. Flick the left continually into his brutal face.

He caught me in the sixth. After five sessions devoted to his bull-like rushes—the furious rushes which had given him his name—and my dancing aside, avoiding, avoiding, he finally caught me.

I had spun around once too often and had lost my sense of orientation. Unknowingly, I allowed him to corner me.

He came in slowly, brutally, his shoulders hunched forward, his feet sliding forward, flat on the canvas floor. Above the roar of the multitude I could hear his voice. "Now, this is it, Buster."

I threw my left out desperately, my right, my left again, into his face, onto the cut over his eyes. He shook his head impatiently, as though my blows were mosquitos, and his right arm pistoned forward.

The blow caught me over the heart, another sank into my stomach. I tried to reply, to fight back, even as I felt the fog rolling into my brain. My last thought was of overpowering despair. All the months of planning, all the build-up, all the dream, gone.

I awoke on my stool, my head wet with water someone had thrown over me, my face being slapped, left, right, left.

Jo Pitcairn was sobbing, almost crying. "Wake up, Frank. Damn it, you've got to wake up."

I groaned and mumbled, "What difference does it make now?"

He slapped me again, rocking my head. "Frank, the bell rang. You haven't lost . . . yet."

"Stop hitting me."

He went to rubbing my legs, desperately. I shook my head, trying to bring clarity.

"Should I tell them now?" he said anxiously.

"No. No, not yet."

The bell rang and Jo pushed me forward.

Bull dashed out, triumph on his heavy face. He was leg-weary, you could see that. But he knew he had me now.

"One, two, three, slide," I muttered, forcing myself up onto my toes. "One, two, three . . ."

My foot slid back, I ducked to the left and he dashed by. He whirled and I grunted, "Over here, Bull," and my left flicked into his face.

Two more sessions. Three. Four.

The crowd had switched its alliance. At first, underdog that I was, they had been humorously for me. They had called out advice, laughing. But I knew that the bets had run against me as high as a hundred to one that I wouldn't last out the first round. Five hundred to one that I wouldn't last three.

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Now they had changed. They booed, hooted, yelled at my failure to come to blows with Bull Wonder. They had wanted to see my destruction after my news column's rending of the Interplanetary Champ. They were Martians, after all. They had pretended sympathy for a moment, but they wanted my blood. The mob!

Bull was slowing now. His rushes were shorter and still shorter and more difficult to avoid. He was trying cunning. Trying to corner me again.

I said to Jo, "What session is it?"

"The twelfth. It's got to be soon, Frank, if you're still going for a knockout. But damned if I see why you should: you've got it made on points if the judges remember those books we loaned them."

I listened to the crowd. "A decision won't do it, Jo. Sure, it'd beat Bull, technically; but would it beat the Games? Listen to those—"

"Yeah," he said, surprised. "Yeah: they're beginning to *like* it. Next year maybe fisticuffs as an Arena event..."

"Start the secret around, Jo," I told him. "It'll be in his corner by the end of the next session."

The bell clanged and I went forward again. Jo ducked back through the ropes and made his way up among the newsmen and as the session progressed I could hear the word spreading through the stadium. We didn't have to wait for the end of the session for Bull to get it. The hum was growing louder, louder.

*Naturalized citizen of Earth!*

*Frank Leslie has become a naturalized citizen of Earth!*

*IF HE WINS, EARTH TAKES OVER!*

Bull heard it and the full impact hit him harder than any blow I'd yet struck.

"Traitor!" he snarled, and rushed again.

He was slowing down, even at the height of his anger. I took the time to hit him twice before dancing away. A right and a left.

When the session was ended I had two persons in my corner. I was breathing agonizingly deep and my vision was blurred with sweat but I got out, "Jen!"

There was something in her face that I hadn't seen there ever before.

"Frank," she said. "Frank, how long have you been planning all this?"

I managed to get a smile through cracked lips. "For years, Jen..."

"Shut up," Jo said. "Here, take a drink of this. Frank, you've got only a couple more rounds."

I took a deep breath and said to Jen, "I've got to wear him down further, get him down to my size. He's still too strong, Jen. You used to be on our side. Stand here in my corner and call out for me. He's in love with you, Jen, and I've *got* to get him to exhaust himself. Jen..."

The bell rang and I went wearily back into the fight.

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Bull came out slowly now. Warily. It came to me that his manager might have done some studying up on fisticuffs even if Bull hadn't. He looked as if he'd had a warning from his corner to play it my way, take it easy and smart and wait for the one perfect chance to land the blow that could annihilate me—his only chance since aside from the knockdown I must've taken every round on points.

So he came out slowly and cautiously.

And above the roar of the crowd a high voice from behind me. A voice that had thrilled both of us, Bull and me, in our time.

And it cried, "Down him, Frank! Batter him senseless. Batter the brute!"

Shock hit his face at the same time as my flickering left fist.

Then he straightened, his expression agonized now. Overpowering hate radiated from him. He rushed, took my heaviest blows in his face, spun and rushed again. I struck, struck, and danced away.

He was all but through, Bull Wonder, but no one in that vast arena, no one of the billions watching the telecast, knew it. And for a time not even I.

Beyond the point of actual consciousness, although still staggering, his hands half raised and making ineffectual offensive and defensive motions, he was through.

In a way there was a majestic quality in Bull Wonder, even in defeat. As worn as I was myself, a flash from one of my ancient books came back to me. A description of an aged buffalo bull being pulled down by a puny wolf: standing, staggering, his tendons cut, but still defiant, refusing to fall.

And I knew that somehow I had to rob Bull of even the dignity in honest defeat.

I was battering him, left, right, left, left, left, right again. In a moment he would collapse. But then Jo Pitcairn laughed, an awkward, unbelieving, all but hysterical laugh. And the last piece of my puzzle fell into place. I knew that I had won and further what I must do.

The bell rang.

In my corner, Jo shrilled, "He's done, Frank. You could have finished him. You *have* to this next session. It's the last."

My wind was better than it had any right to be. I gasped, "Listen, this time laugh again. Over near the microphone. Laugh—like you meant it."

He didn't know what I meant. Not at first.

Bull Wonder had found no recovery in his corner. He was too far gone. But Howie Johns sent him out again on a desperate last chance. Even in this weakened condition that powerful body could wipe me out with the one lucky punch.

Logically, according to the old books, I should've gone for the

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knockout. I didn't. I lashed out with a strong right, and then, as he began to crumble, I clinched with him. Held him up. By the time the umpire came to separate us, Bull was strong enough to stand on his own.

I hit him again, clinched and held him up, and winked over his shoulder into the ranks of the telenews men, and the camera. "World's Gladiator Champ," I said, sarcastically. "Greatest man in the Solar System."

The umpire, shocked, separated us again. I went up on my toes, danced a bit, a caricature of my former performance, and flicked my hand into Bull's face. He almost fell again. I shrugged, in an attempt at comedy, and hit harder, and had to clinch still again to prevent his falling.

Somebody in the press row chuckled. And then, catching on, Jo Pitcairn laughed aloud. A sneering laugh.

It was ludicrous. I made no attempt to achieve dignity myself. I clowned, I danced about him. I flicked him on the left ear, flicked him on the right. Stood deliberately in front of him and punched his nose, one, two, three. Every time he began to fall, I clinched and held him up.

The laughter spread.

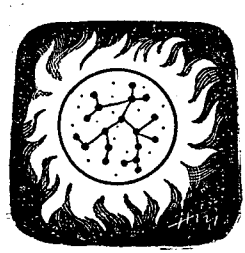
It spread to a roar and I knew there was more than just the ridicule, of the man who had once been champion killer of the system.

They were laughing at the whole concept of the Gladiatorial Meets.

I continued until just before the bell was to ring signalizing the end of the final session, and then I stood back and burlesqued blowing my breath at him. I puffed up my cheeks and blew very hard and his legs crumbled finally and he sank to the Arena canvas.

I looked up wearily for a moment at the convulsed crowd, tears of laughter streaming down their faces. I had done what I had started to do. The Gladiatorial Meets were over. That was obvious. There is no dignity in farce, and it was all farce now. But as they laughed there, the tens of thousands of them, at their fallen champion, I could feel little empathy with them.

I turned and slowly made my way to my corner to where Jennifer sat waiting, her hands quietly in her lap. Her eyes looking into mine.



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*It was Avram Davidson who suggested that this relatively little-known Poe story (from* Godey's Lady's Book, *April, 1844) deserved exhumation; and I'm sure you'll agree. It's an odd and individual story even in Poe's variegated canon. So shrewd a critic of Poe as Philip Van Doren Stern classifies it among "Tales of Fantasy," along with* William Wilson *and* Eleanora; *but another interpretation is possible. More on this after you read the story . . . and try to see why I believe it belongs rather among Poe's tales of ratiocination and science fiction.*

# *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains*

*by* EDGAR ALLAN POE

DURING THE FALL OF THE YEAR 1827, while residing near Charlottesville, Virginia, I casually made the acquaintance of Mr. Augustus Bedloe. This young gentleman was remarkable in every respect, and excited in me a profound interest and curiosity. I found it impossible to comprehend him either in his moral or his physical relations. Of his family I could obtain no satisfactory account. Whence he came, I never ascertained. Even about his age—although I call him a young gentleman—there was something which perplexed me in no little degree. He certainly *seemed* young—and he made a point of speaking about his youth—yet there were moments when I should have had little trouble in imagining him a hundred years of age. But in no regard was he more peculiar than in his personal appearance. He was singularly tall and thin. He stooped much. His limbs were exceedingly long and emaciated. His forehead was broad and low. His complexion was absolutely bloodless. His mouth was large and flexible, and his teeth were more wildly uneven, although sound, than I had ever before seen teeth in a human head. The expression of his smile, however, was by no means unpleasing, as might be supposed; but it had no variation whatever. It was one of profound melancholy—of a phaseless and unceasing gloom. His eyes were abnormally large, and round like those of a cat. The pupils, too, upon any accession or diminution of light, underwent contraction or dilation, just such as is observed in the feline tribe. In moments of excitement the orbs grew bright to a



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degree almost inconceivable; seeming to emit luminous rays, not of a reflected, but of an intrinsic lustre, as does a candle or the sun; yet their ordinary condition was so totally vapid, filmy and dull, as to convey the idea of the eyes of a long-interred corpse.

These peculiarities of person appeared to cause him much annoyance, and he was continually alluding to them in a sort of half explanatory, half apologetic strain, which, when I first heard it, impressed me very painfully. I soon, however, grew accustomed to it, and my uneasiness wore off. It seemed to be his design rather to insinuate than directly to assert that, physically, he had not always been what he was—that a long series of neuralgic attacks had reduced him from a condition of more than usual personal beauty, to that which I saw. For many years past he had been attended by a physician, named Templeton—an old gentleman, perhaps seventy years of age—whom he had first encountered at Saratoga, and from whose attention, while there, he either received, or fancied that he received, great benefit. The result was that Bedloe, who was wealthy, had made an arrangement with Doctor Templeton, by which the latter, in consideration of a liberal annual allowance, had consented to devote his time and medical experience exclusively to the care of the invalid.

Doctor Templeton had been a traveller in his younger days, and, at Paris, had become a convert, in great measure, to the doctrines of Mesmer. It was altogether by means of magnetic remedies that he had succeeded in alleviating the acute pains of his patient; and this success had very naturally inspired the latter with a certain degree of confidence in the opinions from which the remedies had been educed. The Doctor, however, like all enthusiasts, had struggled hard to make a thorough convert of his pupil, and finally so far gained his point as to induce the sufferer to submit to numerous experiments.—By a frequent repetition of these, a result had arisen, which of late days has become so common as to attract little or no attention, but which, at the period of which I write, had very rarely been known in America. I mean to say, that between Doctor Templeton and Bedloe there had grown up, little by little, a very distinct and strongly marked *rapport,* or magnetic relation. I am not prepared to assert, however, that this *rapport* extended beyond the limits of the simple sleep-producing power; but this power itself had attained great intensity. At the first attempt to induce the magnetic somnolency, the mesmerist entirely failed. In the fifth or sixth he succeeded very partially, and after long-continued effort. Only at the twelfth was the triumph complete. After this the will of the patient succumbed rapidly to that of the

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physician, so that, when I first became acquainted with the two, sleep was brought about almost instantaneously, by the mere volition of the operator, even when the invalid was unaware of his presence. It is only now, in the year 1845, when similar miracles are witnessed daily by thousands, that I dare venture to record this apparent impossibility as a matter of serious fact.

The temperament of Bedloe was, in the highest degree, sensitive, excitable, enthusiastic. His imagination was singularly vigorous and creative; and no doubt it derived additional force from the habitual use of morphine, which he swallowed in great quantity, and without which he would have found it impossible to exist. It was his practice to take a very large dose of it immediately after breakfast, each morning — or rather immediately after a cup of strong coffee, for he ate nothing in the forenoon—and then set forth alone, or attended only by a dog, upon a long ramble among the chain of wild and dreary hills that lie westward and southward of Charlottesville, and are there dignified by the title of the Ragged Mountains.

Upon a dim, warm, misty day, towards the close of November, and during the strange *interregnum* of the seasons which in America is termed the Indian Summer, Mr. Bedloe departed, as usual, for the hills. The day passed, and still he did not return.

About eight o'clock at night, having become seriously alarmed at his protracted absence, we were about setting out in search of him, when he unexpectedly made his appearance, in health no worse than usual, and in rather more than ordinary spirits. The account which he gave of his expedition, and of the events which had detained him, was a singular one indeed.

"You will remember," said he, "that it was about nine in the morning when I left Charlottesville. I bent my steps immediately to the mountains, and, about ten, entered a gorge which was entirely new to me. I followed the windings of this pass with much interest.—The scenery which presented itself on all sides, although scarcely entitled to be called grand, had about it an indescribable, and to me, a delicious aspect of dreary desolation. The solitude seemed absolutely virgin. I could not help believing that the green sods and the gray rocks upon which I trod, had been trodden never before by the foot of a human being. So entirely secluded, and in fact inaccessible, except through a series of accidents, is the entrance of the ravine, that it is by no means impossible that I was indeed the first adventurer—the very first and sole adventurer who had ever penetrated its recesses.

"The thick and peculiar mist, or smoke, which distinguishes the Indian Summer, and which now

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hung heavily over all objects, served, no doubt, to deepen the vague impressions which these objects created. So dense was this pleasant fog, that I could at no time see more than a dozen yards of the path before me. This path was excessively sinuous, and as the sun could not be seen, I soon lost all idea of the direction in which I journeyed. In the meantime the morphine had its customary effect – that of enbuing all the external world with an intensity of interest. In the quivering of a leaf–in the hue of a blade of grass–in the shape of a trefoil–in the humming of a bee–in the gleaming of a dew-drop–in the breathing of the wind – in the faint odors that came from the forest–there came a whole universe of suggestion–a gay and motley train of rhapsodical and immethodical thought.

"Busied in this, I walked on for several hours, during which the mist deepened around me to so great an extent, that at length I was reduced to an absolute groping of the way. And now an indescribable uneasiness possessed me – a species of nervous hesitation and tremor. I feared to tread, lest I should be precipitated into some abyss. I remembered, too, strange stories told about these Ragged Hills, and of the uncouth and fierce races of men who tenanted their groves and caverns. A thousand vague fancies oppressed and disconcerted me – fancies the more distressing because vague. Very suddenly my attention was arrested by the loud beating of a drum.

"My amazement was, of course, extreme. A drum in these hills was a thing unknown. I could not have been more surprised at the sound of the trump of the Archangel. But a new and still more astounding source of interest and perplexity arose. There came a wild rattling or jingling sound, as if of a bunch of large keys–and upon the instant a dusky-visaged and half-naked man rushed past me with a shriek. He came so close to my person that I felt his hot breath upon my face. He bore in one hand an instrument composed of an assemblage of steel rings, and shook them vigorously as he ran. Scarcely had he disappeared in the mist, before, panting after him, with open mouth and glaring eyes, there darted a huge beast. I could not be mistaken in its character. It was a hyena.

"The sight of this monster rather relieved than heightened my terrors –for I now made sure that I dreamed, and endeavored to arouse myself to waking consciousness. I stepped boldly and briskly forward. I rubbed my eyes. I called aloud. I pinched my limbs. A small spring of water presented itself to my view, and here, stooping, I bathed my hands and my head and neck. This seemed to dissipate the equivocal sensations which had hitherto annoyed me. I arose, as I thought, a new man, and proceeded steadily and complacently on my way.

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"At length, quite overcome by exertion, and by a certain oppressive closeness of the atmosphere, I seated myself beneath a tree. Presently there came a feeble gleam of sunshine, and the shadow of the leaves of the tree fell faintly but definitely upon the grass. At this shadow I gazed wonderingly for many minutes. Its character stupefied me with astonishment. I looked upward. The tree was a palm.

"I now arose hurriedly, and in a state of fearful agitation – for the fancy that I dreamed would serve me no longer. I saw–I felt that I had perfect command of my senses –and these senses now brought to my soul a world of novel and singular sensation. The heat became all at once intolerable. A strange odor loaded the breeze. A low continuous murmur, like that arising from a full, but gently-flowing river, came to my ears, intermingled with the peculiar hum of multitudinous human voices.

"While I listened in an extremity of astonishment which I need not attempt to describe, a strong and brief gust of wind bore off the incumbent fog as if by the wand of an enchanter.

"I found myself at the foot of a high mountain, and looking down into a vast plain, through which wound a majestic river. On the margin of this river stood an Eastern-looking city, such as we read of in the Arabian Tales, but of a character even more singular than any there described. From my position, which was far above the level of the town, I could perceive its every nook and corner, as if delineated on a map. The streets seemed innumerable, and crossed each other irregularly in all directions, but were rather long winding alleys than streets, and absolutely swarmed with inhabitants. The houses were wildly picturesque. On every hand was a wilderness of balconies, of verandahs, of minarets, of shrines, and fantastically carved oriels. Bazaars abounded; and in these were displayed rich wares in infinite variety and profusion – silks, muslins, the most dazzling cutlery, the most magnificent jewels and gems. Besides these things, were seen, on all sides, banners and palanquins, litters with stately dames close veiled, elephants gorgeously caparisoned, idols grotesquely hewn, drums, banners and gongs, spears, silver and gilded maces. And amid the crowd, and the clamor, and the general intricacy and confusion – amid the million of black and yellow men, turbaned and robed, and of flowing beard, there roamed a countless multitude of holy filleted bulls, while vast legions of the filthy but sacred ape clambered, chattering and shrieking, about the cornices of the mosques, or clung to the minarets and oriels. From the swarming streets to the banks of the river, there descended innumerable flights of steps leading to bathing places, while the river itself

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seemed to force a passage with difficulty through the vast fleets of deeply-burthened ships that far and wide encumbered its surface. Beyond the limits of the city arose, in frequent majestic groups, the palm and the cocoa, with other gigantic and weird trees of vast age; and here and there might be seen a field of rice, the thatched hut of a peasant, a tank, a stray temple, a gypsy camp, or a solitary graceful maiden taking her way, with a pitcher upon her head, to the banks of the magnificent river.

"You will say now, of course, that I dreamed; but not so. What I saw —what I heard—what I felt—what I thought—had about it nothing of the unmistakable idiosyncrasy of the dream. All was rigorously self-consistent. At first, doubting that I was really awake, I entered into a series of tests, which soon convinced me that I really was. Now, when one dreams, and, in the dream, suspects that he dreams, the suspicion *never fails to confirm itself,* and the sleeper is almost immediately aroused.—Thus Novalis errs not in saying that 'we are near waking when we dream that we dream.' Had the vision occurred to me as I describe it, without my suspecting it as a dream, then a dream it might absolutely have been, but, occurring as it did, and suspected and tested as it was, I am forced to class it among other phenomena."

"In this I am not sure that you are wrong," observed Dr. Templeton, "but proceed. You arose and descended into the city."

"I arose," continued Bedloe, regarding the Doctor with an air of profound astonishment, "I arose, as you say, and descended into the city. On my way, I fell in with an immense populace, crowding, through every avenue, all in the same direction, and exhibiting in every action the wildest excitement. Very suddenly, and by some inconceivable impulse, I became intensely imbued with personal interest in what was going on. I seemed to feel that I had an important part to play, without exactly understanding what it was. Against the crowd which environed me, however, I experienced a deep sentiment of animosity. I shrank from amid them, and, swiftly, by a circuitous path, reached and entered the city. Here all was the wildest tumult and contention. A small party of men, clad in garments half-Indian, half-European, and officered by gentlemen in a uniform partly British, were engaged, at great odds, with the swarming rabble of the alleys. I joined the weaker party, arming myself with the weapons of a fallen officer, and fighting I knew not whom with the nervous ferocity of despair. We were soon overpowered by numbers, and driven to seek refuge in a species of kiosk. Here we barricaded ourselves, and, for the present, were secure. From a loop-hole near the summit of the kiosk, I perceived a vast crowd, in

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furious agitation, surrounding and assaulting a gay palace that overhung the river. Presently, from an upper window of this palace, there descended an effeminate-looking person, by means of a string made of the turbans of his attendants. A boat was at hand, in which he escaped to the opposite bank of the river.

"And now a new object took possession of my soul. I spoke a few hurried but energetic words to my companions, and, having succeeded in gaining over a few of them to my purpose, made a frantic sally from the kiosk. We rushed amid the crowd that surrounded it. They retreated, at first, before us. They rallied, fought madly, and retreated again. In the mean time we were borne far from the kiosk, and became bewildered and entangled among the narrow streets of tall overhanging houses, into the recesses of which the sun had never been able to shine. The rabble pressed impetuously upon us, harassing us with their spears, and overwhelming us with flights of arrows. These latter were very remarkable, and resembled in some respects the writhing creese of the Malay. They were made to imitate the body of a creeping serpent, and were long and black, with a poisoned barb. One of them struck me upon the right temple. I reeled and fell. An instantaneous and dreadful sickness seized me. I struggled—I gasped—I died."

"You will hardly persist *now*," said I, smiling, "that the whole of your adventure was not a dream. You are not prepared to maintain that you are dead?"

When I said these words, I of course expected some lively sally from Bedloe in reply; but, to my astonishment, he hesitated, trembled, became fearfully pallid, and remained silent. I looked towards Templeton. He sat erect and rigid in his chair—his teeth chattered, and his eyes were starting from their sockets. "Proceed!" he at length said hoarsely to Bedloe.

"For many minutes," continued the latter, "my sole sentiment—my sole feeling—was that of darkness and nonentity, with the consciousness of death. At length, there seemed to pass a violent and sudden shock through my soul, as if of electricity. With it came the sense of elasticity and of light. This latter I felt—not saw. In an instant I seemed to rise from the ground. But I had no bodily, no visible, audible, or palpable presence. The crowd had departed. The tumult had ceased. The city was in comparative repose. Beneath me lay my corpse, with the arrow in my temple, the whole head greatly swollen and disfigured. But all these things I felt—not saw. I took interest in nothing. Even the corpse seemed a matter in which I had no concern. Volition I had none, but appeared to be impelled into motion, and flitted buoyantly out of the city, re-

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tracing the circuitous path by which I had entered it. When I had attained that point of the ravine in the mountains, at which I had encountered the hyena, I again experienced a shock as of galvanic battery; the sense of weight, of volition, of substance, returned. I became my original self, and bent my steps eagerly homewards – but the past had not lost the vividness of the real—and not now, even for an instant, can I compel my understanding to regard it as a dream."

"Nor was it," said Templeton, with an air of deep solemnity, "yet it would be difficult to say how otherwise it should be termed. Let us suppose only, that the soul of the man of to-day is upon the verge of some stupendous psychal discoveries. Let us content ourselves with this supposition. For the rest I have some explanation to make. Here is a water-color drawing, which I should have shown you before, but which an unaccountable sentiment of horror has hitherto prevented me from showing."

We looked at the picture which he presented. I saw nothing in it of an extraordinary character; but its effect upon Bedloe was prodigious. He nearly fainted as he gazed. And yet it was but a miniature portrait—a miraculously accurate one, to be sure—of his own very remarkable features. At least this was my thought as I regarded it.

"You will perceive," said Templeton, "the date of this picture—it is here, scarcely visible, in this corner —1780. In this year was the portrait taken. It is the likeness of a dead friend—a Mr. Oldeb—to whom I became much attached at Calcutta, during the administration of Warren Hastings. I was then only twenty years old.—When I first saw you, Mr. Bedloe, at Saratoga, it was the miraculous similarity which existed between yourself and the painting which induced me to accost you, to seek your friendship, and to bring about those arrangements which resulted in my becoming your constant companion. In accomplishing this point, I was urged partly, and perhaps principally, by a regretful memory of the deceased, but also, in part, by an uneasy, and not altogether horrorless curiosity respecting yourself.

"In your detail of the vision which presented itself to you amid the hills, you have described, with the minutest accuracy, the Indian city of Benares, upon the Holy River. The riots, the combats, the massacre, were the actual events of the insurrection of Cheyte Sing, which took place in 1780, when Hastings was put in imminent peril of his life. The man escaping by the string of turbans was Cheyte Sing himself. The party in the kiosk were sepoys and British officers, headed by Hastings. Of this party I was one, and did all I could to prevent the rash and fatal sally of the officer who fell, in the

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crowded alleys, by the poisoned arrow of a Bengalee. That officer was my dearest friend. It was Oldeb. You will perceive by these manuscripts," (here the speaker produced a note-book in which several pages appeared to have been freshly written) "that at the very period in which you fancied these things amid the hills, I was engaged in detailing them upon paper here at home."

In about a week after this conversation, the following paragraphs appeared in a Charlottesville paper:

"We have the painful duty of announcing the death of MR. AUGUSTUS BEDLO, a gentleman whose amiable manners and many virtues have long endeared him to the citizens of Charlottesville.

"Mr. B., for some years past, has been subject to neuralgia, which has often threatened to terminate fatally; but this can be regarded only as the mediate cause of his decease. The proximate cause was one of especial singularity. In an excursion to the Ragged Mountains, a few days since, a slight cold and fever were contracted, attended with great determination of blood to the head. To relieve this, Dr. Templeton resorted to topical bleeding. Leeches were applied to the temples. In a fearfully brief period the patient died, when it appeared that, in the jar containing the leeches, had been introduced, by accident, one of the venomous vermicular sangsues which are now and then found in the neighboring ponds. This creature fastened itself upon a small artery in the right temple. Its close resemblance to the medicinal leech caused the mistake to be overlooked until too late.

"N.B. The poisonous sangsue of Charlottesville may always be distinguished from the medicinal leech by its blackness, and especially by its writhing or vermicular motions, which very nearly resemble those of a snake."

I was speaking with the editor of the paper in question, upon the topic of this remarkable accident, when it occurred to me to ask how it happened that the name of the deceased had been given as Bedlo.

"I presume," said I, "you have authority for this spelling, but I have always supposed the name to be written with an *e* at the end."

"Authority?—no," he replied. "It is a mere typographical error. The name is Bedlo with an *e*, all the world over, and I never knew it to be spelt otherwise in my life."

"Then," said I mutteringly, as I turned upon my heel, "then indeed has it come to pass that one truth is stranger than any fiction—for Bedlo, without the *e*, what is it but Oldeb conversed? And this man tells me that it is a typographical error."

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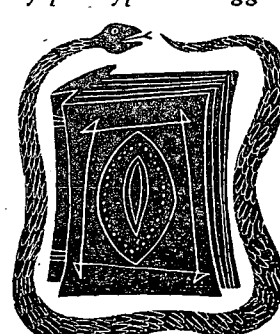
*It is possible for a detective story to contain no detective save the reader, as in Thomas Burke's classic* The Hands of Mr. Ottermole; *and it is my suggestion that this, like virtually every other type of detective story, was invented by Edgar Allan Poe; and in the tale which you have just read.*

*You will observe these clues: that the entire story of Oldeb and Benares rests upon only two pieces of evidence, both produced by Templeton, the "scarcely visible" date on the portrait and the "freshly written" manuscript account; that Bedloe's appearance, according to him, has changed greatly with the years, but the portrait is identical with him today, not at the period when Templeton claims to have been struck by the "miraculous similarity"; that Templeton offers no reason why, for "many years," he never displayed the portrait or said "You remind me of my old friend Oldeb"; and, most significant, Templeton happens to be carrying on his person the vital evidence of portrait and manuscript* before *he has heard Bedloe's story.*

*Motive for the murder of a wealthy young man by his only intimate is not hard to imagine. I suggest that Dr. Templeton saw in the local sangsue an admirable weapon, but feared possible suspicion from such acquaintances as the narrator. He therefore devised a tale which, with its writhing black venom, would cast an atmosphere of the supernatural around the sangsue and deter the narrator (whose impressionability he had nicely gaged) from probing further. By his Mesmeric skill, he implanted the tale in Bedloe's mind, along with the command that he would forget it until he beheld it as a vision on his mountain walk.*

*Poe has succeeded brilliantly in the difficult trick of letting the reader discover facts of which the narrator is not aware; he has once again created a new kind of detective story; and he has, with striking science-fictional anticipation, extrapolated the possibilities of Mesmerism and written the first murder by posthypnotic suggestion.*



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*As this issue goes to press, the headlines are full of reports of a new flock of "saucers" and other UFOs—which seem a desperate effort on the part either of the Ufonics or of the American public and press to divert attention from the IROs (Identified Russian Objects) in our sky. This offers a timely opportunity to present Mr. Wilson's collection of documents establishing at least one reason why Sol III is a planet worth visiting.*

# The Venus Papers

by RICHARD WILSON

THE FIRST PAPER

*Letter from young woman [name withheld] to Secretary-General, United Nations:*

Dear Mr Secretary,

Being that I read about something the UN is doing that I didnt know they did (I thought it was all politics) I thought I would write and ask your help on a delicate problem that has come up.

First I guess I should put down how it happened to make myself clear so you can understand.

I was driving along route 202 one night which is pretty deserted in parts in my 1949 chevie convertible after I took my boyfriend home as he dont have a car himself because were getting married soon and hes saving up for furniture and theres no sense in us having two cars. Only now it turns out we arent getting married after all.

But I better explain why not. As I said before I was driving along about 12:30 at night after I took the boyfriend home from the drivein movie and I saw this funny light in the sky coming down into the woods. I eased up on the gas to get a better look and it kept coming down making a whistling noise and landed in a clearing.

Well of course I knew right away it was a flying saucer from all the things I read about it. I remember thinking just my worse luck I dont have a camera with me or I could shoot some pictures and sell them to Life magazine for good money. It would of helped in setting up housekeeping. But as I say after what happened I dont know if I



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ever will be setting up housekeeping.

But I am getting ahead of my story again only of course its not a story because these are all true facts Im putting down. Well I slowed down to watch and then stopped and the top of the flying saucer began unscrewing and then it tipped back and a man came out and looked around.

He didnt see me right away even though it was a clear moonlight night and I began to think about getting going because I have to get up early to get to my job in the bottling plant. (We bottle soft drinks not liquor I dont want you to think I was having dts when I saw all this.)

But then the man climbed out of the top of the flying saucer and slid down the side to the ground and I decided to wait just a couple of minutes more because it was pretty interesting. After all you dont see a flying saucer land every day at least not here in the east. So I thought I would watch some more in case anybody wanted to write it up and I would be an eyewitness.

He did notice me finally and started walking toward me and I was all set to step on the gas because I was naturally nervous a bit and it was late going on 1 oclock by now. But he was smiling and waving friendly and saying something I couldnt understand on account of he was still too far away.

I could see him clearer though and he was tall and dark and looked something like that english movie actor who I cant think of the name of offhand. I must of chewed off all my lipstick by then so I took out my makeup and put on some fresh and by that time he was by the side of the road maybe twenty feet away.

He said something I couldnt make out but when I shook my head he started talking english and said something fancy like I bring you greetings from beyond the stars and I guess I said something stupid like hello.

Like I said he was friendly and he didnt carry a gun or anything though his clothes were kind of funny and I could of given the gas to the chevie and roared right away from him only it wouldnt of been polite. He was being a perfect gentleman so far.

The next thing he said was his name was Jigger (thats what it sounded like anyway) and I told him mine was Jennie (which it isnt really but I'm changing it like they say to protect the innocent. (I mean I told him my real name which isnt Jennie).)

He said he was pleased to meet me and told me he was from Venus the planet. Well thats where a lot of them come from according to what I read so I wasnt too surprised. I said something about did he have a nice trip and he said yes but he was kind of tired and he

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came over and leaned on the side of the car which had the top down.

He was very goodlooking in case I didn't mention it before and we talked for a while and then I turned off the ignition to save the gas which was low not wanting to run out in the middle of 202 which as I said was pretty deserted.

Jigger asked me about myself and I told him some things and then he started telling me about himself. He was all alone on the flying saucer because they naturally didnt send a bunch of people in the same saucer on what was after all a pretty dangerous trip all the way to Earth.

So then I said something polite about how he really must be lonely so far from home and all by himself and he said yes he was but not so much now that he met me.

Then Jigger said he was almost forgetting his manners on account of he hadnt even asked me to have a look at his flying saucer which I told him I never saw one before except for pictures. So I got out of the car and he helped me across the clearing holding my arm like a gentleman I thought at the time.

We stopped near the edge of the flying saucer which looked a lot bigger close up and I felt kind of adventurous standing there next to this ship from the planet Venus with the moonlight shining on it and making it all silvery. I guess Jigger put his arm around me then for the first time and I didnt notice right away and when I did I didnt really mind it was the least I could do for interplanetary relations.

So when he said would I like to go inside and see how it was I said sure and we climbed up some steps like little pits in the outside of the flying saucer.

There was a lot more inside than I thought there could be. Jigger showed me around and one of the things he showed me was a kind of a viewer which showed scenes in color and 3D of his home planet which before we went inside he showed me up in the sky.

He got very sentimental looking at the pictures and I didnt blame him, being so far away from home and a stranger and all. Then the next thing I knew he was kissing me.

Well this was a bit of a surprise but I have to admit it was not too much of one because just before it happened I was wondering if it would.

So I kissed him back. His lips were warm and they had a kind of an almond taste that was very interesting.

. . . .

I put some dots in there to show that a lot of time went by though I dont remember exactly how long as I didnt have a watch.

Anyhow after a while Jigger asked me if I would like to see his interplanetary drive and he took me into another room.

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I dont really remember exactly how things happened then because I really think he must of used some kind of a hypnotism control over me so Ill have to put in some more dots.

. . . . . .

But believe me I certainly know *what* happened and afterwards when I snapped out of this control he must of had over me I was very furious with him. I told him he certainly had a nerve and what kind of a girl did he think I was anyway.

He said something about it being good interplanetary relations and I let him know in no uncertain terms I didnt care for those kind of relations.

I must of put a scare into him because then he said he would take me back to my car and he did. I guess I got softhearted because he looked so sad and I let him kiss me goodby. By then it was almost dawn and I drove away fast.

The last I saw of Jigger he was standing by the side of the road with the flying saucer in the clearing behind him still looking sad.

Well I didnt get to work till late that day but I didnt get much sleep either and about noon I went back on route 202 and the flying saucer was gone. I got out and looked and there was a big pressed down place with crushed bushes and grass so I knew it was no dream.

Well I guess I must of talked too much to one of the girls when I did get to the bottling plant because it got back to my boyfriend the way these things do and boy was he mad!

He wasnt mad at first. At first he didnt believe a word about the flying saucer and I should of left well enough alone. But me with my big mouth I had to prove it really happened and take him over to 202 and show him the place.

Well you should have heard him!

What I proved to him I found out from his hollering and carrying on wasnt that I saw a flying saucer at all but only the other part of it. You know what I mean.

So you can see the fix Im in Mr Secretary.

My boyfriend I should say my ex-boyfriend because I know when he makes up his mind thats that period has left me flat and I guess I cant blame him too much. The only way I see to straighten out the problem I got myself into by letting interplanetary relations go too far (and if you think it isnt a problem to be jilted in a small town if youre a girl you dont know small towns) is to track down this Jigger who as I told you comes from Venus and is tall and dark and looks like that actor in the english movies.

Now what I read in the paper the other day like I started to say at the beginning was that the United Nations passed a law that gets after husbands that skip out

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on their wife and go to another country. It said in the paper the UN tracks them down and makes them do the right thing. Thats fine for a girl that has a mere international problem but as you can see my problem is even bigger than that.

And of course Jigger isnt exactly my *husband* but you might say hes the next thing to it and believe me he better be if I expect to go on living in this town.

So if your UN has a department that keeps track of these flying saucer people and maybe has a record of where they go I will be very much obliged if you can put me in touch with them so they can get after Jigger.

I figure he must be pretty important if his govt put him in charge of a flying saucer all by himself and I dont want to make any trouble for him. Tell him Im not really mad at him, I just want him to do the right thing and marry me and make an honest woman of me.

Thanking you in advance for your trouble,

[*Name withheld*]

THE SECOND PAPER

FROM: Spacefarer A379 (M. Jigora)
TO: Archivist, Keepers of Morality, Exploration Unit
SUBJECT: Report on Visit to Planet III (*"Earth"*)

O Keepers, Obeisances, &c:

Having carefully studied abstracts of reports by preceding 378 Spacefarers, find little to add except technical data attached as Appendices 1 & 2. Observations necessarily hampered by instructions to avoid bodily contact.

Verify previous findings that the Threepeople (*"Earthmen"*) are an excellent moral lot, justifying Keepers' indulgent permission for contamination-free visitations. Am pleased to be able to report a fact apparently not noted earlier that virtue of human population is of such high order that practice of artificial insemination extends even to some species of domestic animals, among them creatures known as *"cattle"* (subdivision *bulls,* m.; *cows,* f.).

Hail, O Keepers, &c.

[*signed*] M. Jigora,
Spacefarer

THE THIRD PAPER

*Transcription of talk by Spacefarer Jigora to meeting of Ennoblia Underground:*

Cadets, Fellow Spacefarers and Honored Members of the Underground:

Tonight, by coincidence, is the tenth anniversary of that historic day when the first Spacefarer returned from his exploration of the Solar System. He came back, you

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will remember, with the joyous news that Planet III—*Earth*—was not only inhabited, but inhabited by human beings like us in every way but one.

The one difference, the Underground was electrified to hear, was that *Earth* had not reached that sorry state of ectogenetic culture which has made us Ennoblians the superior, moral, clean-living—but love-starved people we are.

I will not compound our collective humiliation by reviewing the politico-moral coup to which our ancestors submitted, and which created the conditions that made spaceflight possible. Not only possible, but vital, since the Underground is exclusively male.

A year ago, Cadets, I sat where you sit now. I was a young man like you whose only chance to escape a life of celibacy was my membership—in the Spacefarers, which alone of all our Underground organizations was prepared to seek love outside Ennoblia—beyond the stars, if need be.

How ironic it is, that in the languages of Earth the name of our virtue-ridden planet is *Venus*, the name of their love goddess, while our women glory in their righteous frigidity.

I hope none of you attended my obligatory public lecture at Purity Daughters Hall. But if any of you did, let me emphasize that I was telling them in the loftiest, most sterile terms what they wanted to hear. I bent the truth shamelessly in conformity with the blood-oath of the Spacefarers.

The real truth, my friends, the naked and unashamed truth, is this: There *is* love at the end of the journey to *Earth*—honest physical love such as existed even here before establishment of the Ectogenocracy—that heartless substitute for natural procreation.

You have heard the previous speaker, the foremost genetics expert in the Underground, cite statistics on the steadily-falling birthrate of Ennoblia. What he was saying, if I may paraphrase his figures for the layman, is that this coldly scientific method—artificial insemination plus test-tube birth—is a failure. In other words, it just isn't doing the job. The human equipment is still the best.

I know, my Cadet friends, that there is nothing so frustrating as being a Spacefarer without a Spacecraft—unless it is being a man deprived of the free exercise of his manhood. So I urge patience with your long studies as you prepare to take the controls of the few ships that are available, but whose numbers increase as word of our noble project spreads.

One day the Underground will be strong enough to turn out the desexed rascals who rule us. But meanwhile we Spacefarers and Spacefarers-to-be are pledged to keep our goal alive through visits to our sister planet, *Earth*.

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Earth has, I have heard, its own Keepers of Morality; but by peculiar local custom, they exert some control over written accounts but none over personal action—an all but incredible situation which makes of our sister Earth a veritable Garden of Bylna.

You will visit her soon, if you work hard and take inspiration from her free existence; and when you do may your visit be fruitful and may you return safely with the message for those who follow you—the message I leave with you now.

And though you will learn in your Spacefaring that two is the magic number, I state the message in words of one syllable: The girls of Earth have not had that old urge bred out of them!

THE FOURTH PAPER

*Excerpt from diary of "Jennie":*

Still no answer to my letter to the United Nations.

Oh Jigger come back to me. You dont have to make an "honest woman" of me—just make me feel like a woman again!

THE FIFTH PAPER

*Application for Spaceflight:*

FROM: Spacefarer A379 (M. Jigora)
TO: Keepers of Morality, Visa Division
DESTINATION: Planet III (*"Earth"*)
REASON FOR APPLICATION: Further exploration

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## *Ye Phantasie Writer and His Catte*

I conjured kitty from midnight sleep
A long-legged Beastie to find,
Or Ghoulies and Ghosties, struck all of a heap
By the Cornish litany.
"Good Lord, deliver us!"
"Anathema!" he whined.

Thus, great for grue to shiver us,
Beating my cat for spite—
Cruel, as I tried, upset by clews.
"Fool!" said his mews to me,
"Look in thy closet, and write!"

WINONA MCCLINTIC

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*With literary attention focused upon the narcotic-addicted, "chicken"-playing juvenile delinquents of today, young Mr. Fritch is one of the first writers to look at those of tomorrow, and proves himself a sort of Evan Hunter of the future . . . with a terrible difference.*

# *Big, Wide, Wonderful World*

*by* CHARLES E. FRITCH

CHUCK GOT THE IDEA. "LET'S HAVE A nightmare," he said.

We looked at him, wondering if he could be serious. He was, or at least he looked like he was, which in his case was the same thing.

"You crazy or something, boy?" I said. "A nightmare? Count me out. I came close a couple times, but no more. Not ever again."

"Aw, you're chicken," he said. "How about you, Bill? Len?"

Bill looked at me and at Chuck and then at Len and then at Chuck again. He rubbed his stubble of beard uncertainly. "I—I don't know, Chuck. It—it's risky stuff. I've seen guys go into nightmares." He shuddered at the memory. "It's not pretty."

"Of course, it's not pretty. Nobody said it was. It's the excitement, the thrills. Why do you suppose they play Russian roulette?"

"At least with Russian roulette," Len put in, "you're either dead or you're not. Having a nightmare you just *wish* you were dead."

"OK, look," Chuck said, and I could see he was trying hard not to be exasperated, "what can we lose? We've got our needles"—he patted the one at his belt—"and if any of us is too far gone, one of the others can give him the hypo."

The way he said it, it sounded pretty reasonable.

"I'm with you," Len said.

"OK," Bill said, "I'll go along with it."

"Me, too," I said, without hesitating. I didn't like it, but I had no choice. I would have to give in, so I figured I might as well do it right away so they wouldn't think I was scared.

I *was* scared, though. Plenty. I remember once I forgot my needle when I went out for a walk, and the whistle sounded for Injection and when I reached down to my belt I found the needle wasn't there,



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Boy, was I scared then. I ran for home as fast as I could, but before I got there the nightmare began and I felt cold and sick to my stomach and I saw the world around me start to waver like a reflection in a muddy stream of water. It was terrible.

It would be terrible now, too, but I had to stick it out.

"OK, then," Chuck said, consulting his wristwatch, "here's what we'll do. The Injection whistle's gonna blow in about half an hour. We'll go over by the woods there so no one'll see us and lie down; you can take a nightmare a lot easier if you're lying down. Then, when the whistle blows we'll just stay there. We won't do anything. We won't even take our needles from the holster, got that? We'll just sit there and have ourselves a nightmare and see who can take it the longest."

We nodded. I hoped I wasn't really as pale and scared-looking as I felt. I knew the one who could take it the longest wouldn't be me, but I prayed I wouldn't be the first to needle myself. Let Bill or Len do it, I thought, it wouldn't be so bad if one of them cracked first. . . .

We went over to the woods and sprawled on the ground out of sight of anyone who might pass by. It was a beautiful day, and it was a big, wide, wonderful world in which to be alive. The trees were blossoming with spring, and the grass was green and cool, and the air was fresh and clean. I wished I didn't have to go through with this. But I did, and I forced the wish from my mind. Soon it would be over, I told myself; it would be over and done and in the past and that would be that.

I must have dozed, for I came awake with a start when the whistle blew.

Chuck looked at his watch. "Right on the button," he said proudly. "We've got about five minutes."

Five minutes never passed so slowly. We sat staring at each other. All of us were pretty nervous. I found myself tearing a leaf into shreds and discarded it and wished I'd kept it because I wanted to do something so I wouldn't have to think of what was going to happen.

"It should be starting now," Chuck said.

"Yes," Bill breathed. "Things are starting to get a little fuzzy. How about you, Len? Anything?"

"No, not yet. . . . Wait! Yes, it's starting."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't speak. Around me, the world was beginning to come apart at the seams. *The needle!* a voice cried inside me. *No!* I thought, fighting it.

I felt myself getting cold, shivering. My stomach began tying itself into knots. Desperately, I looked at the others. One of them had to do it first. *Needle yourself!* I thought at Bill. *Needle yourself!* I thought at Len. I looked at Chuck. He was trembling. His face was distorted in pain. I closed my eyes, balled my fists and struck at the ground.

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Someone screamed.

I forced my eyes open. It was Len. He had staggered erect, was pawing frantically at the hypo in his belt. Suddenly the pain seemed more bearable. Len would be the first, I thought unashamedly, and I the second. His hypo came loose, flashing in the sunlight, and then it dropped from his shaking hands into the grass somewhere. He cried out in despair and dropped to all fours.

*I'll help you, Len,* I thought. But I couldn't move. The world was pressed down on me, knotting my stomach, forcing the blood to pound in my head. The air swirled in muddy currents, and there was the smell of burned wood and the odor of decay. I forced myself to one knee.

The world was a nightmare. The Earth was a black, ugly thing now. The forest was a graveyard of charred stumps. The buildings in the distance were not buildings at all but skeletons of buildings. I felt sick.

I turned to look at Chuck and Bill and Len. They were hideous things, pale, scarred, disfigured horribly, like grubs of humans produced by some atomic war. I vomited.

*The needle!* I thought frantically. I got it out of the holster with a trembling hand, fearing at any moment I might drop it and lose the precious drug inside and have to spend forever in this nightmare world. I jabbed myself, and the liquid flowed warmly into my veins, and I dropped back on the ground to relax and wait.

The trembling ceased. The dark mists parted before the warm rays of the sun, and the air became fresh again and the grass and trees green, the buildings whole. I breathed a sigh of relief and stood up.

Len was lying face down, unmoving, his arms outstretched and his fingers extended to within an inch of his shattered needle. Bill was sitting beside a tree, an empty needle in one hand; he was panting, eyes closed, unable to speak. Chuck was screaming.

I pulled Chuck to his feet and hit him as hard as I could. He lay still and moaned. I fumbled at his needle holster, got the hypo out and with a steady hand shot the fluid into his arm. He relaxed and after a moment his eyes fluttered open. There was fear in those eyes, then relief as they saw the world was good again.

I went over to see how Len was.

"I never want to go through that again," Bill said. He held his head in his hands and said it over and over and over again. "I never want to go through that again. I never want to go through that again."

"I didn't think it would be quite so bad," Chuck said, almost apologetically. "Everybody OK?"

"Len's dead," I told him.

"Oh," he said.

"Look, Chuck," I said. "You're bigger than I am and older, but if you ever suggest something like this again I'm going to beat you into a bloody mess!"

Chuck looked up at me, at my

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clenching fists, and over at Len, and he knew I meant it. He nodded slowly.

"C'mon, then," I said. "We've got to get Len back home."

Together the three of us carried the body into the city, through the big, wide, wonderful world of tall trees and green grass and fresh air and shining buildings.

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*As you know by now from many stories, it's impossible for the lively speculative intellect of Poul Anderson to touch the most familiar theme without transmuting it into a new and provocative notion. This time the theme is the patronizing admission of a retarded Earth into a million-year-old Galactic civilization. . . .*

# Backwardness

*by* POUL ANDERSON

As a small boy he wanted to be a rocket pilot—and what boy didn't in those days?—but learned early that he lacked the aptitudes. Later he decided on psychology, and even took a bachelor's degree *cum laude*. Then one thing led to another, and Joe Husting ended up as a confidence man. It wasn't such a bad life; it had challenge and variety as he hunted in New York, and the spoils of a big killing were devoured in Florida, Greenland Resort, or Luna City.

The bar was empty of prospects just now, but he dawdled over his beer and felt no hurry. Spring had reached in and touched even the East Forties. The door stood open to a mild breeze, the long room was cool and dim, a few other men lazed over mid-afternoon drinks and the TV was tuned low. Idly, through cigaret smoke, Joe Husting watched the program.

The Galactics, of course. Their giant spaceship flashed in the screen against wet brown fields a hundred miles from here. Copter view . . . now we pan to a close-up, inside the ring of UN guards, and then back to the sightseers in their thousands. The announcer was talking about how the captain of the ship was at this moment in conference with the Secretary-General, and the crewmen were at liberty on Earth. "They are friendly, folks. I repeat, they are friendly. They will do no harm. They have already exchanged their cargo of U-235 for billions of our own dollars, and they plan to spend those dollars like any friendly tourist. But both the UN Secretariat and the President of the United States have asked us all to remember that these people come from the stars. They have been civilized for a million years. They



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have powers we haven't dreamed of. Anyone who harms a Galactic can ruin the greatest—"

Husting's mind wandered off. A big thing, yes, maybe the biggest thing in all history. Earth a member planet of the Galactic Federation! All the stars open to us! It was good to be alive in this year when anything could happen . . . hm. To start with, you could have some rhinestones put in fancy settings and peddle them as gen-yu-wine Tardenoisian sacred flame-rocks, but that was only the beginning—

He grew aware that the muted swish of electrocars and hammering of shoes in the street had intensified. From several blocks away came a positive roar of excitement. What the devil? He left his beer and sauntered to the door and looked out. A shabby man was hurrying toward the crowd. Husting buttonholed him. "What's going on, pal?"

"Ain't yuh heard? Galactics! Half a dozen of 'em. Landed in duh street uptown, some kinda flying belt dey got, and went inna Macy's and bought a million bucks' wortha stuff! Now dey're strolling down dis-a-way. Lemme go!"

Husting stood for a while, drawing hard on his cigaret. There was a tingle along his spine. Wanderers from the stars, a million-year-old civilization embracing the whole Milky Way! For him actually to see the high ones, maybe even talk to them . . . it would be something to tell his grandchildren about if he ever had any.

He waited, though, till the outer edge of the throng was on him, then pushed with skill and ruthlessness. It took a few sweaty minutes to reach the barrier.

An invisible force-field, holding off New York's myriads—wise precaution. You could be trampled to death by the best-intentioned mob.

There were seven crewmen from the Galactic ship. They were tall, powerful, as handsome as expected: a mixed breed, with dark hair and full lips and thin aristocratic noses. In a million years you'd expect all the human races to blend into one. They wore shimmering blue tunics and buskins, webby metallic belts in which star-like points of light glittered—and jewelry! My God, they must have bought all the gaudiest junk jewelry Macy's had to offer, and hung it on muscular necks and thick wrists. Mink and ermine burdened their shoulders, a young fortune in fur. One of them was carefully counting the money he had left, enough to choke an elephant. The others beamed affably into Earth's milling folk.

Joe Husting hunched his narrow frame against the pressure that was about to flatten him on the force screen. He licked suddenly dry lips, and his heart hammered. Was it possible—could it really happen

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that *he,* insignificant he might speak to the gods from the stars?

Elsewhere in the huge building, politicians, specialists, and vips buzzed like angry bees. They should have been conferring with their opposite numbers from the Galactic mission—clearly, the sole proper way to meet the unprecedented is to set up committees and spend six months deciding on an agenda. But the Secretary-General of the United Nations owned certain prerogatives, and this time he had used them. A private face-to-face conference with Captain Hurdgo could accomplish more in half an hour than the councils of the world in a year.

He leaned forward and offered a box of cigars. "I don't know if I should," he added. "Perhaps tobacco doesn't suit your metabolism?"

"My what?" asked the visitor pleasantly. He was a big man, running a little to fat, with distinguished gray at the temples. It was not so odd that the Galactics should shave their chins and cut their hair in the manner of civilized Earth. That was the most convenient style.

"I mean, we smoke this weed, but it may poison you," said Larson. "After all, you're from another planet."

"Oh, that's OK," replied Hurdgo. "Same plants grow on every Earth-like planet, just like the same people and animals. Not much difference. Thanks." He took a cigar and rolled it between his fingers. "Smells nice."

"To me, that is the most astonishing thing about it all. I never expected evolution to work identically throughout the universe. *Why?"*

"Well, it just does." Captain Hurdgo bit the end off his cigar and spat it out onto the carpet. "Not on different-type planets from this, of course, but on Earth-type it's all the same."

"But why? I mean, what process —it can't be coincidence!"

Hurdgo shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just a practical space man. Never worried about it." He put the cigar in his mouth and touched the bezel of an ornate finger ring to it. Smoke followed the brief, intense spark.

"That's a . . . a most ingenious development," said Larson. Humility, yes, there was the line for a simple Earthman to take. Earth had come late into the cosmos and might as well admit the fact.

"A what?"

"Your ring. That lighter."

"Oh, that. Yep. Little atomic-energy gizmo inside." Hurdgo waved a magnanimous hand. "We'll send some people to show you how to make our stuff. Lend you machinery till you can start your own factories. We'll bring you up to date."

"It—you're incredibly generous,"

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said Larson, happy and incredulous.

"Not much trouble to us, and we can trade with you once you're all set up. The more planets, the better for us."

"But . . . excuse me, sir, but I bear a heavy responsibility. We have to know the legal requirements for membership in the Galactic Federation. We don't know anything about your laws, your customs, your—"

"Nothing much to tell," said Hurdgo. "Every planet can pretty well take care of itself. How the hell you think we could police fifty million Earth-type planets? If you got a gripe, you can take it to the, uh, I dunno what the word would be in English. A board of experts with a computer that handles these things. They'll charge you for the service—no Galactic taxes, you just pay for what you get, and out of the profits they finance free services like this mission of mine."

"I see," nodded Larson. "A Coordinating Council."

"Yeh, I guess that's it."

The Secretary-General shook his head in bewilderment. He had sometimes wondered what civilization would come to be, a million years hence. Now he knew, and it staggered him. An ultimate simplicity, superman disdaining the whole cumbersome apparatus of interstellar government, freed of all restraints save the superman morality, free to think his giant thoughts between the stars!

Hurdgo looked out the window to the arrogant towers of New York. "Biggest city I ever saw," he remarked, "and I seen a lot of planets. I don't see how you run it. Must be complicated."

"It is, sir." Larson smiled wryly. Of course the Galactics would long ago have passed the stage of needing such a human ant hill. They would have forgotten the skills required to govern one, just as Larson's people had forgotten how to chip flint.

"Well, let's get down to business." Hurdgo sucked on his cigar and smacked his lips. "Here's how it works. We found out a big while back that we can't go letting any new planet bust its way into space with no warning to anybody. Too much danger. So we set up detectors all over the Galaxy. When they spot the, uh, what-you-call-'ems—vibrations, yes, that's it, vibrations—the vibrations of a new star drive, they alert the, uh, Coordinating Council and it sends out a ship to contact the new people and tell 'em the score."

"Ah, indeed. I suspected as much. We have just invented a faster-than-light engine . . . very primitive, of course, compared to yours. It was being tested when—"

"Uh-huh. So me and my boys are supposed to give you the once-over and see if you're all right. Don't want warlike peoples running around loose, you know. Too much danger."

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"I assure you—"

"Yes, yes, pal, it's OK. You got a good strong world setup and the computer says you've stopped making war." Hurdgo frowned. "I got to admit, you got some funny habits. I don't really understand everything you do . . . you seem to think funny, not like any other planet I ever heard of. But it's all right. Everybody to his own ways. You get a clean bill of health."

"Suppose . . ." Larson spoke very slowly. "Just suppose we had not been . . . approved—what then? Would you have reformed us?"

"Reformed? Huh? What d'you mean? We'd have sent a police ship and blown every planet in this system to smithereens. Can't have people running loose who might start a war."

Sweat formed under Larson's arms and trickled down his ribs. His mouth felt dry. *Whole planets—*

But in a million years you would learn to think *sub specie aeternatis.* Five billion warlike Earthlings could annihilate fifty billion peaceful Galactics before they were overcome. It was not for him to judge a superman.

"Hello, there!"

Husting had to yell to be heard above the racket. But the nearest of the spacemen looked at him and smiled.

"Hi," he said.

Incredible! He had greeted little Joe Husting as a friend. Why—? Wait a minute! Perhaps the sheer brass of it had pleased him. Perhaps no one else had dared speak first to the strangers. And when you only said, "Yes, sir," to a man, even to a Galactic, you removed him—you might actually make him feel lonely.

"Uh, like it here?" Husting cursed his tongue, that its glibness should have failed him at this moment of all moments.

"Sure, sure. Biggest city I ever seen. And *draxna,* look at what I got!" The spaceman lifted a necklace of red glass sparklers. "Won't their eyes just bug out when I get home!"

Someone shoved Husting against the barrier so the wind went from him. He gasped and tried to squirm free.

"Say, cut that out. You're hurting the poor guy." One of the Galactics touched a stud on his belt. Gently but inexorably, the field widened, pushing the crowd back . . . and somehow, somehow Husting was inside it with the seven from the stars.

"You OK, pal?" Anxious hands lifted him to his feet.

"I, yeah, sure. Sure, I'm fine!" Husting stood up and grinned at the envious faces ringing him in. "Thanks a lot."

"Glad to help you. My name's Gilgrath. Call me Gil." Strong fingers squeezed Husting's shoulder.

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"And this here is Bronni, and here's Col, and Jordo, and—"

"Pleased to meet you," whispered Husting inadequately. "I'm Joe."

"Say, this is all right!" said Gil enthusiastically. "I was wondering what was wrong with you folks."

"Wrong?" Husting shook a dazed head, wondering if They were peering into his mind and reading thoughts of which he himself was unaware. Vague memories came back, grave-eyed Anubis weighing the heart of a man.

"You know," said Gil. "Standoffish, like."

"Yeh," added Bronni. "Every other new planet we been to, everybody was coming up and saying hello and buying us drinks and—"

"Parties," reminded Jordo.

"Yeh. Man, remember that winging on Alphaz? Remember those girls?" Col rolled his eyes lickerishly.

"You got a lot of good-looking girls here in New York," complained Gil. "But we got orders not to offend nobody. Say, do you think one of those girls would mind if I said hello to her?"

Husting was scarcely able to think; it was the reflex of many years which now spoke for him, rapidly:

"You have us all wrong. We're just scared to talk to you. We thought maybe you didn't want to be bothered."

"And *we* thought *you*—Say!" Gil slapped his thigh and broke into a guffaw. "Now ain't that something? They don't want to bother us and we don't want to bother them!"

"I'll be *rixt!*" bellowed Col. "Well, what do you know about that?"

"Hey, in that case—" began Jordo.

"Wait, wait!" Husting waved his hands. It was still habit which guided him; his mind was only slowly getting back into gear. "Let me get this straight. You want to do the town, right?"

"We sure do," said Col. "It's mighty lonesome out in space."

"Well, look," chattered Husting, "you'll never be free of all these crowds, reporters—" (A flashbulb, the tenth or twelfth in these few minutes, dazzled his eyes.) "—you won't be able to let yourselves go while everybody knows you're Galactics."

"On Alphaz—" protested Bronni.

"This isn't Alphaz. Now I've got an idea. Listen." Seven dark heads bent down to hear an urgent whisper. "Can you get us away from here? Fly off invisible or something?"

"Sure," said Gil. "Hey, how'd you know we can do that?"

"Never mind. OK, we'll sneak off to my apartment and send out for some Earth-style clothes for you, and then—"

John Joseph O'Reilly, Cardinal Archbishop of New York, had

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friends in high places as well as in low. He thought it no shame to pull wires and arrange an interview with the chaplain of the spaceship. What he could learn might be of vital importance to the Faith. The priest from the stars arrived, light-screened to evade the curious, and was received in the living room.

Visible again, Thyrkna proved to be a stocky white-haired man in the usual blue-kirtled uniform. He smiled and shook hands in quite an ordinary manner. At least, thought O'Reilly, these Galactics had during a million years conquered overweening Pride.

"It is an honor to meet you," he said.

"Thanks," nodded Thyrkna. He looked around the room. "Nice place you got."

"Please be seated. May I offer you a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do."

O'Reilly set forth glasses and a bottle. In a modest way, the Cardinal was a connoisseur, and had chosen the Chambertin-Clos carefully. He tasted the ritual few drops. Whatever minor saint, if any, was concerned with these things had been gracious; the wine was superb. He filled his guest's glass and then his own.

"Welcome to Earth," he smiled.

"Thanks." The Galactic tossed his drink off at one gulp. "Aaah! That goes good."

The Cardinal winced, but poured again. You couldn't expect another civilization to have the same tastes. Chinese liked aged eggs while despising cheese. . . .

He sat down and crossed his legs. "I'm not sure what title to use," he said diffidently.

"Title? What's that?"

"I mean, what does your flock call you?"

"My *flock*? Oh, you mean the boys on board? Plain Thyrkna. That's good enough for me." The visitor finished his second glass and belched. Well, so would a cultivated Eskimo.

"I understand there was some difficulty in conveying my request," said O'Reilly. "Apparently you did not know what our word *chaplain* means."

"We don't know every word in your lingo," admitted Thyrkna. "It works like this. When we come in toward a new planet, we pick up its radio, see?"

"Oh, yes. Such of it as gets through the ionosphere."

Thyrkna blinked. "Huh? I don't know all the *de*-tails. You'll have to talk to one of our tech . . . technicians. Anyway, we got a machine that analyzes the different languages, figures 'em out. Does it in just a few hours, too. Then it puts us all to sleep and teaches us the languages. When we wake up, we're ready to come down and talk."

The Cardinal laughed. "Pardon me, sir. Frankly, I was wondering

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why the people of your incredibly high civilization should use our worst street dialects. Now I see the reason. I am afraid our programs are not on a very high level. They aim at mass taste, the lowest common denominator—and please excuse my metaphors. Naturally you —But I assure you, we aren't all that bad. We have hopes for the future. This electronic educator of yours, for instance . . . what it could do to raise the cultural level of the average man surpasses imagination."

Thyrkna looked a trifle dazed. "I never seen anybody what talks like you Earthlings. Don't you ever run out of breath?"

O'Reilly felt himself reproved. Among the Great Galactics, a silence must be as meaningful as a hundred words, and there were a million years of dignity behind them. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh, it's all right. I suppose a lot of our ways must look just as funny to you." Thyrkna picked up the bottle and poured himself another glassful.

"What I asked you here for . . . there are many wonderful things you can tell me, but I would like to put you some religious questions."

"Sure, go ahead," said Thyrkna amiably.

"My Church has long speculated about this eventuality. The fact that you, too, are human, albeit more advanced than we, is a miraculous revelation of God's will. But I would like to know something about the precise form of your belief in Him."

"What do you mean?" Thyrkna sounded confused. "I'm a, uh, quartermaster. It's part of my job to kill the rabbits—we can't afford the space for cattle on board a ship. I feed the gods, that's all."

"The *gods!*" The Cardinal's glass crashed on the floor.

"By the way, what's the names of your top gods?" inquired Thyrkna. "Be a good idea to kill them a cow or two, as long as we're here on their planet. Don't wanna take chances on bad luck."

"But . . . you . . . *heathen—*"

Thyrkna looked at the clock. "Say, do you have TV?" he asked. "It's almost time for *John's Other Life*. You got some real good TV on this planet."

By the dawn's early light, Joe Husting opened a bleary eye and wished he hadn't. The apartment was a mess. What happened, anyway?

Oh, yeah . . . those girls they picked up . . . but had they really emptied all those bottles lying on the floor?

He groaned and hung onto his head lest it split open. *Why* had he mixed scotch and stout?

Thunder lanced through his eardrums. He turned on the sofa and saw Gil emerging from the bedroom. The spaceman was thump-

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ing his chest and booming out a song learned last night. *"Oh, roly poly—"*

"Cut it out, will you?" groaned Husting.

"Huh?—Man, you've had it, ain't you?" Gil clicked his tongue sympathetically. "Here, just a minute." He took a vial from his belt. "Take a few drops of this. It'll fix you up."

Somehow Husting got it down. There was a moment of fire and pinwheels, then—

—he was whole again. It was as if he had just slept ten hours without touching alcohol for the past week.

Gil returned to the bedroom and started pummeling his companions awake. Husting sat by the window, thinking hard. That hangover cure was worth a hundred millions if he could only get the exclusive rights. But no, the technical envoys would show Earth how to make it, along with star ships and invisibility screens and so on. Maybe, though, he could hit the Galactics for what they had with them, and peddle it for a hundred dollars a drop before the full-dress mission arrived.

Bronni came in, full of cheer. "Say, you're all right, Joe," he trumpeted. "Ain't had such a good time since I was on Alphaz. What's next, old pal, old pal, old pal?" A meaty hand landed stunningly between Husting's shoulderblades.

"I'll see what I can do," said the Earthman cautiously. "But I'm busy, you know. Got some big deals cooking."

"I know," said Bronni. He winked. "Smart fellow like you. How the *hell* did you talk that bouncer around? I thought sure he was gonna call the cops."

"Oh, I buttered him up and slipped him a ten-spot. Wasn't hard."

"Man!" Bronni whistled in admiration. "I never heard anybody sling the words like you was doing."

Gil herded the others out and said he wanted breakfast. Husting led them all to the elevator and out into the street. He was rather short-spoken, having much to think about. They were in a ham-and-eggery before he said:

"You spacemen must be pretty smart. Smarter than average, right?"

"Right," said Jordo. He winked at the approaching waitress.

"Lotta things a spaceman got to know," said Col. "The ships do just about run themselves, but still, you can't let just any knucklehead into the crew."

"I see," murmured Husting. "I thought so."

A college education helps the understanding, especially when one is not too blinkered by preconceptions.

Consider one example: Sir Isaac Newton discovered (*a*) the three laws of motion, (*b*) the law of

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gravitation, (*c*) the differential calculus, (*d*) the elements of spectroscopy, (*e*) a good deal about acoustics, and (*f*) miscellaneous, besides finding time to serve in half a dozen official and honorary positions. A single man! And for a genius, he was not too exceptional; most gifted Earthman have contributed to several fields.

And yet . . . such supreme intellect is not necessary. The most fundamental advances, fire- and tool-making, language and clothing and social organization, were made by apish dimbulbs. It simply took a long time between discoveries.

Given a million years, much can happen. Newton founded modern physics in one lifespan. A hundred less talented men, over a thousand-year period, could slowly and painfully have accomplished the same thing.

The IQ of Earth humanity averages about 100. Our highest geniuses may have rated 200; our lowest morons, as stupid as possible without needing institutional care, may go down to 60. It is only some freak of mutation which has made the Earthman so intelligent; he never actually *needed* all that brain.

Now if the Galactic average was around IQ 75, with their very brightest boys going up to, say, 150—

The waitress yipped and jumped into the air. Bronni grinned shamelessly as she turned to confront him.

Joe Husting pacified her. After breakfast he took the Galactic emissaries out and sold them the Brooklyn Bridge.


## WE'D LIKE TO SUGGEST . . .

If you enjoy The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, you will enjoy some of the other fine Mercury Publications, now on sale:

- **VENTURE**—*Top-flight action-and-adventure science fiction. In March, read Poul Anderson's "The Game of Glory," of an Earthman playing a deadly spy game in a far-distant, watery world. Other top stories; plus features by Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov.*
- **MERCURY MYSTERY BOOK-MAGAZINE**—*George Bagby's murder puzzler, "The Three-Time Losers," is the featured novel in April. Plus articles by Erle Stanley Gardner, Miriam Allen deFord, and entertaining thrillers by Walt Sheldon, Joseph Zaitchik and others.*
- **BESTSELLER MYSTERY No. 209**—*"Bridge to Vengeance" (formerly titled "The Little Walls") by Winston Graham. " . . . a superior suspense item," says the N. Y.* Times *of this tale of vengeance and danger.*


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# *The Best Science-Fantasy Books of 1957*

*by* ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE FACT THAT MAN HAS NOW ACTUally entered the Space Age may have revolutionized the popular attitude toward science fiction. There are, at least, signs that in the first few months P. S. (Post Sputnik) a number of people have stopped thinking of s.f. as all-that-Buck-Rogers-nonsense.

An occasional indignant contributor to the letters columns of newspapers still shares ex-Secretary Wilson's feeling that he has troubles enough on Earth, and the British Astronomer Royal clings vehemently to the belief that spaceflight is "bilge"; but there is widespread recognition of the fact that the Age of Space is here, and that s.f. was its prophet.

Several TV programs of adult s.f. are now in the planning stages. There are even announcements of intelligent adult s.f. films, without Things. Perhaps most significantly, magazines and reviews have blossomed out with a number of articles favorable to s.f. and written out of some acquaintance with the field. (I found myself commissioned to prepare such pieces for journals as disparate as the N. Y. *Times Magazine* and *Playboy*.)

The most astonishing example of s.f. prescience lies in the phenomenon that its publishers seem to have anticipated this sudden outburst of public interest. As early as the fall of 1956, a "boom" of sorts started in magazines with the launching of a number of new titles, including Fantasy House's *Venture*. And where 1956 marked, in both quantity and quality, the low point in s.f. book publishing since the 1949 beginnings of the present trend, 1957 has matched and in some respects passed the top boom year of 1953.

How much of this expanded publishing, on the newsstands or in the bookstores, will reach the potential new public, I don't know. It's my feeling that much of the new interest is concerned with accurate prophecy of the immediate future. "OK, so you boys said there was going to be a satellite. What next?"



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But the initial toe-dipping into the ocean of space is a subject that s.f. has long outgrown. Only an Arthur C. Clarke can interest the habituated reader in such familiar (to us) trivia. How is one to appeal to the new readers without boring the old? And is the new audience large enough (and loyal enough—remember the comparable curiosity after—Hiroshima, and how short-lived it was) to justify devoting a book or a magazine exclusively to it, and the hell with whether the veterans are bored?

These are questions for 1958. As of now, writing at the very end of 1957, I can only record that this was a good year for s.f. books. There were more new s.f. novels than ever before; and a fair number of them were better than anything since that miracle-year of 1953. If anthologies were too few (a complaint I never thought I'd make), this is at least an extreme preferable to the bi-weekly anthos of 1954.

In my round-up a year ago, I was forced to apply the "Best of the Year" definition very literally, and to include many merely acceptable books, which *were* the best of 1956. Even by this method, I was able to line up only 29 recommendable titles. This time I urge 44 books upon you—and without any hedging. These are not merely good-as-the-year-goes, but *good*.

All of 1957's books were, of course, scheduled for publication some time A. S. Now I'm as curious as you are to see what the Year 1 P. S. brings to our bookshelves.

### S. F. NOVELS

There were 50 science fiction novels (new, not counting reprints) published in 1957—a 25% increase over the previous peak in 1953! (And 24 of these 50 were published by only 2 firms: Ace and Avalon.) That some of these (especially from Major Publishers) were abominable is, I suppose, an inescapable aspect of boom-publishing. What's more significant is the number that were exceptionally good, both in concept and in writing. When the Asimov, Bester and Heinlein novels were being simultaneously serialized (in, respectively, *Astounding, Galaxy* and *F&SF*), I thought, "It's hard to see how anything much better can come out; but this trio is enough to make 1957 a fairly distinguished year." And then Mr. Christopher in England and Mr. Dick in California proceeded to write books even better than anyone had suspected they could; and probably the Novel-of-the-Year distinction must be disputed by their very different creations. (There's a fine point of ethics involved in my putting on my Best list a novel which I serialized. You are at liberty to delete the Heinlein . . . but you'll be missing a grand book!)

THE NAKED SUN, by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, $2.95)

THE STARS MY DESTINATION, by Alfred Bester (Signet, 35¢)

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NO BLADE OF GRASS, by John Christopher (Simon & Schuster, $2.95)
EYE IN THE SKY, by Philip K. Dick (Ace, 35¢)
THE DOOR INTO SUMMER, by Robert A. Heinlein (Doubleday, $2.95)

These are the Best-of-the-best; but many more of the year's novels might have stood alone as stellar attractions in a lesser year. Somewhat flawed but still considerable works included Arthur C. Clarke's THE DEEP RANGE, Hal Clement's CYCLE OF FIRE, Chad Oliver's THE WINDS OF TIME, Jack Vance's BIG PLANET and A. E. van Vogt's EMPIRE OF THE ATOM. More solid nominees are Blish's absorbing experiment in a s.f.-like "straight" novel, Farmer's lusty adventure tale, Gordon's Defoe-begotten "pure" s.f. and Wyckoff's subtle Wheel of If.

THE FROZEN YEAR, by James Blish (Ballantine, $2.75; paper 35¢)
THE GREEN ODYSSEY, by Philip José Farmer (Ballantine, $2.75; paper 35¢)
FIRST ON MARS, by Rex Gordon (Ace, 35¢)
THE BRAINTREE MISSION, by Nicholas E. Wyckoff (Macmillan, $3.50)

FANTASY NOVELS

Borderlines are hard to draw; and some of the "s.f." above may fit your notion of fantasy. But the three novels that follow seem to me to fit no possible widest definition of s.f.—even though one of them was so published. Carr's is another of his splendid adventures in detection-out-of-time; Dick's is sweeping fantasy in the *Unknown* tradition; and Lewis' is, to be blunt, a masterwork of art in the form of a tale of men and gods.

FIRE, BURN!, by John Dickson Carr (Harper, $3.50)
THE COSMIC PUPPETS, by Philip K. Dick (Ace, 35¢)
TILL WE HAVE FACES, by C. S. Lewis (Harcourt, Brace, $4.50)

SHORT STORIES

No possibility of dividing fantasy from s.f. here, for the year's best collections were mixed. It was a good year for shorts—in book form. Honorable mention may well go to the Hokan absurdities of Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson in EARTHMAN'S BURDEN, to the pantropic ingenuity of James Blish in THE SEEDLING STARS, and to Charles Beaumont's uneven THE HUNGER and Arthur C. Clarke's agreeably foolish TALES FROM THE WHITE HART; but in top place (with the warning to specialists that the Coates and La Farge volumes also contain high quality realistic fiction) stand:

EARTH IS ROOM ENOUGH, by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, $2.95)
THE HOUR AFTER WESTERLY, by Robert M. Coates (Harcourt, Brace, $3.50)
THE THIRD LEVEL, by Jack Finney (Rinehart, $3)
A PAUSE IN THE DESERT, by Oliver La Farge (Houghton Mifflin, $3.50)
THE SHORES OF SPACE, by Richard Matheson (Bantam, 35¢)

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ANTHOLOGIES

There were—and I can still hardly believe it—only 4 s.f. anthologies in 1957, and 3 of these belonged to annual series. Here I must, regretfully, resort to the best-of-this-year principle; there was no new anthology of classic stature, though the Merril and Quinn series-volumes are enjoyable. The excellent Golding-Wyndham-Peake collection of unpublished novellas is not strictly an anthology; but under what other category could it be listed? The Burnett book is the most creatively edited of a number of odd anthologies, part fantasy, part crime, part unclassifiable-strange. On quality alone, if you happen not to know most of the stories by heart, you might add Don Congdon's STORIES FOR THE DEAD OF NIGHT and Alfred Hitchcock's STORIES THEY WOULDN'T LET ME DO ON TV.

19 TALES OF TERROR, edited by Whit and Hallie Burnett (Bantam, 35¢)

SOMETIME, NEVER, by William Golding, John Wyndham and Mervyn Peake (Ballantine, 35¢)

S-F: SECOND ANNUAL VOLUME, edited by Judith Merril (Gnome, $3.95; Dell, 35¢)

THE FIRST WORLD OF IF, edited by James L. Quinn and Eve Wulff (Quinn, 50¢)

FANTASY MISCELLANY

Some of the most delightfully imaginative and entertaining fantasy of the year has come in odd packages: in pictures by Searle, in verse by Nash, in both by Gorey (an underrated Master) or in wondrous stories of no known form by O'Connor and Thurber. If any of these were missing from your Christmas stocking, get them *now*.

THE DOUBTFUL GUEST, by Edward Gorey (Doubleday, $2)

THE CHRISTMAS THAT ALMOST WASN'T, by Ogden Nash (Little, Brown, $3.50)

BENJY: A FEROCIOUS FAIRY TALE, by Edwin O'Connor (Atlantic-Little, Brown, $4)

MERRY ENGLAND, ETC., by Ronald Searle (Knopf, $3.95)

THE WONDERFUL O, by James Thurber (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)

I hear by swamp telegraph that the year also saw the publication of several books about Pogo by Walt Kelly, but urgent and extensive correspondence with the publishers presumptive (Simon & Schuster) has failed to enable me to report on them. If you can latch on to them, consider them automatically on this list: any book of Kelly's is a "best" of mine.

JUVENILES

If the latest Heinlein is, surprisingly, a bit conventional and familiar for adults (who usually relish his "teen-age" books even more than does their nominal audience), it's a grand book for the youth to whom it all comes fresh. "French" (Asimov), Norton, and, for younger readers, Todd are all in their expected superior form; and Eager,

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in fantasy, continues to prove himself the direct heir of E. Nesbit.

MAGIC BY THE LAKE, by Edward Eager (Harcourt, Brace, $2.95)

LUCKY STARR AND THE MOONS OF JUPITER, by Paul French (Doubleday, $2.75)

CITIZEN OF THE GALAXY, by Robert A. Heinlein (Scribner's, $2.95)

STAR BORN, by Andre Norton (World, $2.75)

SPACE CAT MEETS MARS, by Ruthven Todd (Scribner's, $2.25)

ROCKETS AND SATELLITES

None of 1957's many Vanguard-inspired books foresaw a Russian beginning in space (though Stine hints at the possibility), and most of them appeared somewhat dated and parochial very shortly after publication. But three, at least, remain valuable both as reference works and as excellent armchair reading:

THE MAKING OF A MOON, by Arthur C. Clarke (Harper, $3.50)

ROCKETS, MISSILES AND SPACE TRAVEL: REVISED AND ENLARGED EDITION, by Willy Ley (Viking, $6.75)

ROCKET POWER AND SPACE FLIGHT, by G. Harry Stine (Holt, $3.75)

OTHER NON-FICTION

Greenberg creates a welcome new type of anthology; Carrington proves himself a "romantic naturalist" comparable to Ley; Moore explores an all-but-unknown planet and Balleine a curious occult culture; Randolph assembles more of his inimitable folk records. And Gardner offers contributions of inestimable value both to the history of pseudo-science and to the critique of American fantasy.

PAST FINDING OUT: THE STORY OF JOANNA SOUTHCOTT, by G. R. Balleine (Macmillan, $3)

MERMAIDS AND MASTODONS, by Richard Carrington (Rinehart, $3.95)

FADS AND FALLACIES IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE, by Martin Gardner (Dover, $1.50)

THE WIZARD OF OZ & WHO HE WAS, by Martin Gardner and Russel B. Nye (Michigan State U., $3.75)

COMING ATTRACTIONS, edited by Martin Greenberg (Gnome, $3.50)

THE PLANET VENUS, by Patrick Moore (Macmillan, $3)

THE TALKING TURTLE AND OTHER OZARK FOLK TALES, by Vance Randolph (Columbia U., $4)

REPRINTS

Perhaps such a round-up should include only new or revised books; but it's impossible to overlook the classic absolute among anthologies, or two unusually important single-author collections.

FAMOUS SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES: ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE, edited by Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas (Modern Library, $2.95)

FANCIES AND GOODNIGHTS, by John Collier (Bantam, 50¢)

THE VIKING PORTABLE LIBRARY EDGAR ALLAN POE, edited by Philip Van Doren Stern (Viking, $1.45)

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*In which an unnamed ginmill witnesses a science-fictional event even more suited to precisely such a setting than anything that has ever happened at Gavagan's or the White Hart.*

# *How Bug-Eyed Was My Monster*

*by* ROBERT BLOCH

SOMETHING VERY UNUSUAL HAPpens to me the other night. It is around ten o'clock and I am standing in a tavern.

This in itself maybe isn't so unusual. But what makes it unusual is that this is the night when Fast Mickey saves the world.

Fast Mickey is the bartender at this juice-stand, and I don't suppose anybody figures at the time that he is going to be the cat who saves the world, but most of us regulars already know he is blue-blade sharp. Lots of uptowners come into the tavern just to talk to Fast Mickey—real hep characters like bigshot professors and skull doctors and even some used-car dealers.

He is most particular-wise the favorite of the headshrinkers. In fact, on this evening he is entertaining a whole gang of them, including Subconscious Sigmund.

Subconscious Sigmund always brings his troubles to Fast Mickey. "You bartenders are really the best psychiatrists," he says. "You listen to people's troubles every day of the year and hear more confessions than we do. You're the original father-image and medicine-man rolled into one. Maybe you can help me out."

Fast Mickey smiles and nods. "Sure," he says. "You want I should probe your psyche or whatever? OK, just climb up here on the bar and stretch out. Just close your eyes and relax now, and tell me the first thing that comes into your mind—"

The reason I remember all this is because I am standing right next to them, trying to catch the ball game on the radio. And here it is, the ninth inning, all tied up, and the Bums are at bat, and—

And then, it happens.

The studio announcer cuts in with a fast pitch of his own.

"*Flash!*" he hollers. "*We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a bulletin from the Disassociated Press!*"

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Everybody listens carefully, because we know they won't interrupt a ball game unless it's really important.

"Maybe they got a cure for some disease," I say.

"Could be that Russia is dropping the H-Bomb," Subconscious Sigmund suggests.

"It must be more important than that to cut into the Bums game," says Fast Mickey. "I figure it's an announcement that Marilyn Monroe is gonna make *The Brothers Karamazov.*"

We were all wrong.

The studio announcer is really yelling. *"The Unidentified Flying Object over the city is now identified as a genuine flying saucer. Landing in the corner of Central Park, it is presently discharging a passenger. Eye-witness reports agree that the creature emerging from the saucer is definitely an extraterrestial. It is about nine feet tall, covered with green fur, and has multiple tentacles. Plaese stand by for further bulletins now coming in."*

One of the cats down the bar starts to cackle. "It's a gag, that's what it is—like this here Invasion From Mars bit they do years ago. There ain't no such thing as a flying saucer."

"Mass hallucination, apparently," says Subsconscious Sigmund. "Who can believe that business about multiple tentacles? Covered with green fur, indeed!"

"I don't know about the tentacles," I tell him. "But if you want to check on that green fur bit, come around early some morning and look at my tongue."

"STAND BY!" yells the announcer again. *"Latest bulletin on the creature from the flying saucer. It is definitely outside the strange craft now, walking across the Park. According to what is coming over the wire to us here in the studio, it is being met by the Mayor's Welcoming Committee and three squad-cars armed with riot guns. Oops—what's that again? Our report says it is brushing off the Mayor's Welcoming Committee with one tentacle and brushing off the riot guns with another. Apparently bullets have no effect on this organism. It is overturning the squad cars and heading for the street. The crowds are running."*

"I'll say they are!" squawks Fast Mickey, all of a sudden. "Turn off that radio and you can hear them. I just happen to remember—Central Park is only two blocks away from here!"

This is true. With the radio off we can hear noise from outside—cats are howling and scampering off to their pads.

"It's no fake, then," Subconscious Sigmund mutters. "A monster is in our midst. Somebody must stop him!"

"Don't look at me," I tell him. "I am allergic to monsters. In fact,

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I once lose a good job working for a politician because I refuse to attend his monster rally."

"This creature lands on earth for a definite purpose," Subconscious Sigmund says. "If after all these years of flying saucer reports, one actually comes down, it means there's an important reason. The creature must want something."

"Well, it isn't the keys to the city, apparently," says Fast Mickey. "And it isn't a night in the pokey, either."

"Of course not," Sigmund tells him. "They're handling him all wrong. This calls for a psychologist. Such as me. I'm going out and reason with him."

"Wait!" yells Fast Mickey.

But Subconscious Sigmund doesn't wait. He grabs up the little portable couch he carries around with him for curb-service and dashes out the door.

The rest of us sit and wait. Pretty soon there is more shrieking outside the door and then we hear some awful crashes. There is a pretty chick at the other end of the bar whose name is Estrellita Shapiro and who weighs about 120 pounds soaking wet.

This I find out all of a sudden, because after the first big crash she jumps into my lap and upsets a drink all over her.

"Save me!" she yells. "The monster is coming this way!"

Sure enough, the door opens, but it isn't the monster. It's Subconscious Sigmund, and he is beat down to the seat. His clothes are torn, his glasses are broken, and half of his goatee is missing.

"Hear that crash a minute ago?" he pants. "The creature just rips down a four-story office building. It goes scrabbling around inside with its big green tentacles. It's looking for something all right."

"You probe its mind?" asks Fast Mickey.

"Not me! I wouldn't probe its mind with a ten-foot pole!" yells Sigmund. "It takes one look at me when I get close and starts to grab. So I do the only sensible thing."

"Which is—?"

"I run like hell," Subconscious Sigmund says. He looks at us. "I suggest we turn out the lights and lock the door, but fast. If it ever decides to come after me—"

Suddenly he leaps up.

"Yeow!" he remarks. *"Here it is now!"*

And here it is, coming right through the door.

The radio report is mostly right. The creature is nine feet tall, it is covered with green fur, and it has lots of long, slimy feelers. Also it has eyes that bug out. Only it doesn't walk, really. It sort of writhes and twists and skootches its way along.

It is really awful. It looks like Elvis Presley with tentacles.

For a second it stands in the doorway and then it opens up its

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mouth and starts making sounds. And the sounds are even worse than Elvis Presley.

By this time Subconscious Sigmund and the other head-shrinkers and customers are under the bar, in back. I would be there too, only this Estrellita Shapiro is hanging onto my neck and trying to crawl down the top of my shirt. She almost makes it, too.

But Fast Mickey just stands there. He isn't scared a bit. He looks up at this bug-eyed monster and listens to its sounds. Then he reaches down behind the bar and pours a drink. He hands it over.

The monster doesn't pay any attention. He starts wriggling down the aisle towards me.

Fast Mickey shakes his head. He turns around and opens the cash register, hauls out a wad of lettuce and slaps it down next to the drink. The monster doesn't even look at the loot. He keeps right on moving.

All at once Fast Mickey races around the end of the bar and comes up to where I'm sitting with Estrellita Shapiro. He yanks her off my lap and shoves her over to the monster.

The monster wriggles right by her.

"No use," whispers Subconscious Sigmund, from under the bar. "I know what you're doing—trying to find out what the creature is after. It isn't money, it isn't liquor, it isn't women."

"What else does anybody come in here for?" Fast Mickey says.

"This isn't somebody," Subconscious Sigmund groans. "It's a being from another world—something weird, alien, uncanny!"

The monster is making nasty growling noises now. But all of a sudden Fast Mickey smiles. He turns around, walks right up to the monster, and grabs it by a tentacle. Then he pulls it along with him to the end of the room and disappears.

Two minutes later the monster is gone. It just walks out through the tavern again and up the street. No more shrieks, no more crashes. And when we turn on the radio we are just in time to hear a report that it is back in the flying saucer and the flying saucer is taking off.

That's the end of it, of course. We're all out in the open again, and Fast Mickey is setting up drinks on the house, and then the reporters come and interview him on saving the world.

Fast Mickey is very modest. "Nothing to it," he says. "When Subconscious Sigmund describes the creature as uncanny, I suddenly understand. Taking a trip in a flying saucer is probably just like taking a long drive in an automobile. Sooner or later, you're going to want something. I just figure out what it is and take him there."

"Brilliant psychology," says Sub-

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conscious Sigmund. "But how do you ever arrive at this conclusion?"

"Because I am a bartender, not a psychiatrist," Fast Mickey tells him. "And I know that anybody who comes into a tavern wants one of four things. If it isn't liquor, or money, or women, then it has to be the other. You see," he says, lifting his drink, "it's all a matter of elimination."

☆ ☆ ☆

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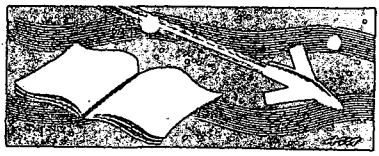

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*Shirley Jackson's last story here* (The Missing Girl, *December, 1957*) *was a strange and disturbing one. This time, however, she uses her spell-weaving powers to create a simple warm fantasy on the unexpected nature of omens—tender, funny and wholly delightful.*

# *The Omen*

*by* SHIRLEY JACKSON

IT WOULD BE PUSHING TRUTH TOO FAR to say that Grandma Williams was the finest person in the world to live with. As her daughter said sometimes, but only after the greatest professions of loyalty, "She's just the *sweetest* old lady in the world, of course, but sometimes she's *very* trying." And her son-in-law, whose patience was immense, and whose courtesy was unfailing, had been heard to say with an affectionate smile to his wife, "Granny seems to be aging rapidly these days." Even her grandchildren, of whom there were two, sometimes found themselves exasperated by her, and would say in such cases, "Oh, *Granny*," or "*Gosh*," in the tone of voice used by children when words fail them.

Ordinarily, however, everyone loved Grandma Williams almost as much as she loved them, and they ate the custards she prepared so tenderly, and bore with the small surprises she invented for them, and gave her warm scarves and gloves for Christmas, and homemade valentines on Valentine's Day, and gardenias on Mother's Day, and took her out to dinner and the theater on her birthday, and saw that her glasses were found when she lost them and brought her home books from the lending library and remembered to kiss her goodnight and to be polite to the two or three old friends who still remained to her, and who came sometimes to call. And when Granny announced brightly at breakfast one morning that today she was going shopping no one criticized her, or even smiled.

"Isn't it something I can do for you, dear?" her daughter asked, looking into the coffee pot. "I may go into town today, and I'd be glad to do any errands you want."

"Happy to get you anything my-



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self," said her son-in-law. "Easy to stop off somewhere on my way home."

Granny shook her head vehemently. "This is important shopping," she said. "I have to do it myself."

"Can I go with you?" asked her younger grandchild, who was eight years old, and who was named Ellen and was commonly supposed to resemble Granny as a girl.

"Indeed you may not," Granny said. "This is a surprise."

If a slight sigh went around the breakfast table Granny did not notice. "A surprise for everyone," she said. "You remember yesterday?"

Everyone remembered yesterday; yesterday had been an event. Yesterday Granny had received in the morning mail a check for thirteen dollars and seventy-four cents, with a covering letter saying that the sender had owed it to Granny's husband for nearly fifty years, and so was paying it now to his widow, with interest. Granny's son-in-law had figured out the interest for her, and it was quite proper. Granny, today, was rich. "A surprise for everyone," she repeated happily, "with my new money."

Her daughter opened her mouth to protest, and then stopped. Nothing that Granny could possibly buy with thirteen dollars and seventy-four cents would give her more pleasure than surprises for everybody. "I think that's *wonderful,*" her daughter said finally, eying her family around the table.

"Very kind of you," said Granny's son-in-law.

"I want—" began Ellen.

"Dear," said her mother, "this is to be a surprise."

"But I want to *know*," said Granny. "Robert, will you get me a pencil and paper?" Her older grandchild, who was ten, departed and returned in haste, partly because he had been carefully taught to treat his Granny courteously, and partly because surprises did not come every day.

"Now," said Granny, her pencil poised over the paper. "Margaret?"

"You mean what do I want?" said her daughter. She thought. "I don't really know," she said slowly. "A handkerchief, perhaps? Or a box of candy?"

"If I were to get you a bottle of perfume," said Granny with great cunning, "what kind would you most like?"

Her daughter considered again. "Well," she said, "I usually wear a kind called 'Carnation.'"

"*Carnation,*" Granny said. She wrote on her paper. Then she looked inquiringly at her son-in-law. "John," she said. "What for you?"

He frowned soberly. "Let me see," he said. "I suppose what I most need is a few good cigars. 'El Signo,' I generally smoke."

"Cigars," Granny said complacently. "A very good thing in a

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man. Your grandfather used to say that cigarettes were for women and children. What kind, again?"

"El Signo," said her son-in-law.

"I can't possibly write such an outlandish name," said Granny. "What is it in English?"

"The sign," he told her, not looking at his wife.

*"The sign,"* Granny said as she wrote. "You see," she explained, "I can always ask the man what it means, in cigars."

"Now me?" said Ellen.

"Now you, Granddaughter."

"A doll's house with real glass in the windows," said Ellen immediately, "and a bride doll, and a live kitty and—"

"Not a live kitty," said her mother hastily.

"A stuffed kitty?" said Ellen, wide-eyed. "A blue stuffed kitty?"

"Splendid," said Granny. *"Blue cat,"* she wrote. "Robert?" she said.

"Roller skates," said Robert. "Walkie-talkie."

"What?" said Granny.

"Walkie-talkie," said Robert. "It's a sort of telephone, like."

Granny stared at her son-in-law, who smiled and shrugged. *"Telephone,"* Granny said, and wrote it down. Then she leaned back and looked farsightedly at her list. *"Carnation,"* she read. *"The sign. Blue cat. Telephone."* She smiled around the table at the family. "Now me," she said, *"I* want a ring."

"A ring?" said her daughter. "Granny, you *have* rings. You have your diamond ring, and the little one set with a cameo, and Dad's silver seal ring, and—"

"Not any of those," said Granny, shaking her head vigorously. "I saw a little ring I wanted, in the five and ten the other day. It cost twenty-nine cents, and it was silver-plated and it had on it two hearts set together. I *liked* that ring."

Her daughter and son-in-law exchanged glances. "If you'll wait till your birthday," said her daughter, "perhaps you might have the same ring in real silver; if it's something you like we could easily have it made."

"I want this one," said Granny. She rose from the table, picked up her list, and put it carefully into her pocket. "Now," she said. "Now I am going shopping."

She departed for her room to get her coat and hat, and her daughter said anxiously to her son-in-law, "Do you think it's all right? I could insist on going along."

"She's getting so much pleasure out of it," said the son-in-law, "it would be a real shame to spoil it. And of course she'll be all right."

"Everyone's always glad to help an old lady, anyway," said the daughter. "If she gets into any difficulty, that is."

Granny, stylish in her neat black coat and a small rakish hat trimmed with violets, set out at precisely ten o'clock, an hour after her son-in-law had gone off to his office,

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and an hour and ten minutes after her grandchildren had climbed noisily into the school bus. Her daughter stood in the doorway and waved to her as she went down the street; Granny had insisted upon traveling into town on the bus, instead of taking a taxi, and her daughter stood in the doorway until she saw Granny reach the corner, signal competently to the bus driver with her umbrella, and climb aboard, helped, as she always was, somehow, by the driver and two friendly passengers. People would be taking care of Granny like that all day, her daughter thought, and, with an admiring smile, she turned back inside to finish off the breakfast dishes. I'll just dress later, she thought, and run into town myself. I might meet her somewhere and bring her home.

Granny sat proudly in the bus, perfectly aware of the attention she was attracting. Her son-in-law had kindly cashed her check, and Granny had thirteen dollars and seventy-four cents in her pocketbook. Her list, she thought, was safely tucked into her pocket, but, as a matter of fact, it had slipped out and lay unnoticed on the seat when Granny alighted in the center of town, assisted by the bus driver, a kind gentleman, and two schoolgirls.

Not everyone had had such a pleasant two days as Granny had. Miss Edith Webster, for instance, had put in forty-eight hours (and this the first week of her vacation!) of unpleasant and fruitless argument. Edith loved her mother quite as much as Granny's daughter loved Granny, but Edith's mother was perhaps a shade more selfish than Granny – Granny, as Edith would have pointed out if she had known about it, had at least allowed her daughter to get married. Edith's mother was explicit upon this point.

"If you marry this Jerry fellow," she told Edith–as she had gone on telling Edith, over and over, for three years–"you will be leaving your poor old mother all alone, not that I think you *care* about me–no, by now I know better than to think my only daughter *cares* about what happens to her poor old mother–but you'd always have it on your conscience, I hope, that you left your poor old mother to starve."

"You wouldn't starve," Edith had pointed out over and over for three years, although by now the words had no meaning, from being said so often. "Aunt Martha has been wanting you to come and live with her for a long time, and Jerry and I could always give you enough money to get along."

"Aunt Martha? What would I want to live with Aunt Martha for? You certainly couldn't have much respect for my *comfort* if you tried to make me go and live with Aunt *Martha.*"

On the morning that Granny set out so blithely, Edith had finally

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said, with more anger than she had ever shown her mother before, "I have every right in the world to get married and have a family of my own, and it's not fair for you to try and stop me."

"You're my daughter," her mother retorted, "and you owe me all your education and all the care and love I've given you all these years. And I'm not going to let you throw yourself away on some good-for-nothing and leave your poor old mother to starve."

At that point Edith snatched up her hat and fled from the house, leaving her mother still talking, dwelling lovingly upon the symptoms of starvation, and how Edith might possibly remember to show up at her deathbed—not, however, to be forgiven.

Walking down the street Edith, who was actually an agreeable and pleasant girl, and who did not enjoy quarreling, told herself firmly that a decision must be reached, and immediately. Her mother did not show any signs of ever changing her mind, and, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it, there was the telling fact that Jerry, who had waited patiently for three years, was beginning to remark restlessly that all his friends were married, that a man expected to settle down before he was thirty, that he personally thought that Edith's mother would never give in, and that *he* thought the thing to do was up and get married, and let the old lady give her consent afterwards. Edith thought he was right, if she tried to be impartial about it, but still the courage required to defy her mother was more than she could muster.

Going down the street (and she was at this time approximately two miles from Granny Williams, who was just then marching boldly down her own street on her way to a different bus) Edith, in her neat dark blue coat and red hat (as opposed to Granny, who was wearing a black coat and a hat with violets) sighed deeply, and thought: if I only had an idea of what to do; if only somebody, something, somehow, would show me the way, make up my mind for me, give me an omen.

All of which is, of course, a most dangerous way of thinking.

Edith, on her own bus, reached the center of town almost as soon as Granny did, and, by an odd coincidence, Edith even passed Granny on the street without noticing her, nor did Granny notice Edith. Perhaps, indeed, Edith thought swiftly: *look at the nice old lady in the hat with flowers;* perhaps the thought passed through Granny's mind: *look at the pretty girl with the sad frown.* These things happen daily, among the thousands of people who pass one another in crowds. At any rate Edith, whose ultimate destination was the home of a girl friend on the other side of town (someone to whom Edith could

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pour out her troubles, and who would give her sympathy, if no kind of help) got on the wrong bus. She was worried, and thinking about something else, and there were a lot of people waiting at the bus stop, and Edith did not look up in time to see the sign on the front of the bus, and a man in the crowd near her said loudly, "It's the Long Avenue bus," which was the one Edith wanted, so Edith got on, and paid her fare, and sat down in the first seat she came to, which was the seat vacated by Granny not long ago, and the seat where Granny's list was waiting to be an omen to Edith. Edith picked it up, and put it into her pocket without thinking any more about it than that it was something she herself had dropped, like a transfer or a scrap of envelope with an address on it, and she did not even look at it when she put it into her pocket.

Edith was not the sort of person who, realizing suddenly that she is on the wrong bus, immediately stands up and screams and reproaches the driver for taking her in the wrong direction, and insists upon being put off on a strange street corner at once. She was annoyed at herself for her mistake, but was not inclined to think that the bus company had deceived her. It was not vitally important, after all, for her to reach her girl friend's house before lunch: she was in a strange section of town, and she knew she could easily get out of the bus, have her lunch in the first restaurant she came to, and then proceed in a leisurely manner. So, at the first stop, she got down from the bus and stood while it roared away, regarding her surroundings.

Now at this point begins the series of events which might easily have been a dream of Edith's except for its conclusion. For, as Edith stood on the corner, she knew first that she was in a part of town she had never seen before, and secondly that there was no landmark in sight, not even a sign saying RESTAURANT OR COFFEE SHOPPE OR EAT OR DINER OR LUNCHEONETTE OR FOUNTAIN: in other words, no place where a girl alone could ask for information about where she was without looking foolish. Then, with that enjoyable feeling of anonymity which comes when you are a little lost, with plenty of money in your pocket, and the secret feeling that you can always get home by calling for a taxi, Edith realized that for a little while anyway she had escaped the problem of her mother and Jerry, for the simple reason that neither of them could at present find her to remind her of it. The next thing that happened was her shocking discovery that she did not have any money after all. The change purse she had slipped into her pocket contained, instead of several one dollar bills and a five—which she now recalled having spent for the hat she was wearing on her head at the moment—only

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four nickels and approximately seven pennies. Thus Edith, marooned.

It seemed wise, at first, to retire to a secluded spot and wonder what to do. A bus back to the center of town? Then where was the bus stop? Edith craned her neck, but could not find a familiar sign. She fumbled in her pockets and at that moment found Granny's list. Staring at it uncomprehendingly, thinking for a minute that it was a stray dollar bill in her pocket, Edith read: *"Carnation. The sign. Blue cat. Telephone. Ring."*

"What on earth?" said Edith out loud, and a child passing stopped, stared at her, and then said "Huh?"

"Nothing," Edith said quickly. "Just an omen."

The child stared further, and went off looking back at her.

Edith was intelligent enough to know that when she asked for an omen and got it the least she could do was obey it. Reading it again—she stopped, this time, to admire the queer, old-fashioned handwriting, so much like a voice from a sweet and simple past—it occurred to her that since her omen told her *"carnation"* a carnation was obviously indicated. Smiling at herself, although not with so much amusement as she might have felt if this omen had not arrived exactly on schedule, she started down the street, in the general direction of the center of town, looking for a carnation. At this time she made her first discovery about omens: that their requirements are usually much more difficult than they seem to be, and that fewer carnations were in evidence than one might suspect in early summer. For instance, a florist shop seemed a possible place to look, although it did seem rather like cheating until Edith, scrutinizing carefully the window display of a mangy-looking shop which advertised itself as a FLORIST SHOP, found that there were no carnations. Roses, yes. Lilies, violets, ferns, horrid-looking daisies. But not carnations. Puzzled, Edith went on. There were paper flowers in the window of a funeral parlor, and they might as well have been carnations as anything else, but Edith thought that perhaps paper flowers were not allowed, particularly since a funeral parlor seemed no place for a self-respecting omen to lead her. Then, as she had begun to despair, and had gone about four blocks, someone said, "Pardon me, but are you Miss Murrain?"

Edith turned; the words were addressed to her. Her mind did not take in the sense of them for a minute, because the man speaking to her was wearing a white carnation in his buttonhole. Edith realized that the omen had said not *"carnations"* but *"carnation,"* and she said, "I'm sorry?"

"Are you Miss Murrain?" the man asked again, very politely.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Edith.

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"Are you sure?" said the man.

"Yes," said Edith.

"Are you *positive?*" said the man.

Edith stared. "I am not the lady you are looking for," she said as firmly as she could. (Am I? she wondered suddenly.) "I'm sorry," she added, when she saw that the man was troubled.

"I wish you were," he said, and sighed.

"Don't you know the lady?" Edith asked.

He laughed. "Come and see," he said. He took her politely by the arm and led her further down the block to where a group of people were standing around a store window. The store was a grocery, and this was apparently its grand opening day, for bright-colored flags draped the doorway, and signs saying FREE SODA FOR THE LADIES stood upon the sidewalk. The crowd of people standing before the store window separated as Edith and her guide came up to the window.

"See?" said Edith's guide, and Edith's mind registered *"sign,"* the second word on her omen.

FIND MISS MURRAIN, the sign entreated. FIND HER, FIND HER, FIND HER. And, in smaller letters: "Somewhere in this neighborhood today, Murrain Brothers, fine groceries and delicatessen goods, have a lady friend who is walking alone, waiting for someone to come up to her and say: 'Are you Miss Murrain?' If you ask her this, she will answer: 'Murrain Brothers are the finest grocers in town.' If you find Miss Murrain and bring her to this store —Murrain Brothers, fine groceries and delicatessen goods—we will give you ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS in trade. Special Grand Opening Offer, today only." And, at the bottom of the sign, in very small letters, were the words: "Special hint: Miss Murrain is wearing a hat the color of the bags in which Murrain Brothers pack their special coffee."

"Red," said her guide, when he saw Edith lean forward to read the small letters on the bottom of the sign, "it means red, they pack their special coffee in red bags."

"I see," said Edith, who was of course wearing a red hat. She turned and smiled at her guide. "I wish I could help you," she said.

"So do I," he said. They made their way out of the crowd again and stood on the sidewalk. "I could use a hundred dollars worth of groceries."

"If I see Miss Murrain I'll try to catch her for you," Edith said.

"Catch her for yourself," he said seriously. "They mean it about the groceries." Abruptly he looked at his watch. "Good lord," he said, "I'm late."

"By the way," Edith said as he turned to go, "If you don't mind my asking you, why are you wearing the carnation?"

"That?" he said, looking down. "Oh, *that.* Oh, I'm getting married in ten minutes." He was gone, hur-

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rying madly off down the street.

"Congratulations," Edith said weakly after him. Bewildered, she stood for a minute. *"Sign,"* she told herself, *"carnation, sign, sign, carnation, carnation, sign, sign, car—"* Realizing that she was beginning to babble, she tightened her lips and reached into her pocket for the slip of paper.

*"Carnation,"* it said. *"Sign. Blue cat."*

"Blue cat?" Edith frowned. "Blue cat? *Blue* cat? Blue *cat?"* She was babbling again. She set her shoulders firmly, and stepped positively out toward what she guessed was the nearest traffic artery to the center of town.

"Excuse me, are you Miss Murrain?"

She turned; it was a lady, and Edith was sorry for a minute that she was *not* Miss Murrain—the lady so obviously thought she had collared her hundred dollars worth of groceries, and she looked, moreover, as though a hundred dollars worth of groceries would not come at all amiss.

"I'm sorry," Edith said. "I wish I were," she said.

"You were wearing the hat, is why I asked," the woman said. She smiled politely, and walked on.

If I go home now, Edith was thinking, Mother will be after me again about Jerry. If I go on wandering, sooner or later I will have to go back and then the whole problem will—

"Are you Miss Murrain?"

"Sorry, I'm not."

"Just thought I'd ask."

Or else, Edith thought, if I went back and told her once and for all—

"You Miss Murrain?'

"Sorry."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"O.K."

Probably the best way would be to put off deciding for a while yet, and maybe somehow—

"It's Miss Murrain! Are you Miss Murrain, hey?"

"No, I'm sor—"

"It's Miss Murrain—hey, I caught her, it's Miss Murrain!"

Looking around, Edith saw with dismay that she was surrounded by a crowd of people. They were mostly women, housewives out doing their morning marketing, several pushing baby carriages, and there were a few men; all of them—men, women, children—staring at her and at the stout, red-faced woman who had her by the arm.

"I got her, I got her!"

"Look," Edith said quietly to the red-faced woman, "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm *not* Miss Murrain. People have been asking me the same—"

"Hundred bucks worth of groceries, golly!"

Edith, trying to pull away, found that the red-faced woman had hold of her much as she would have held a rebellious child. "Please," Edith said urgently, "believe me—"

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"George—Maggie—Earl—I got her, look, it's me caught her, the girl with the groceries!"

"Let me *go,*" Edith said, and pulled harder. "Listen," she said, to the crowd, making her voice as reasonable as she could, "if I were this Miss Murrain, I would have *had* to say so, wouldn't I? Because I'm *really* not."

"She's trying to get away, Missus," one of the men observed impartially. "If she goes, your groceries go with her."

"Look," said the red-faced woman to Edith, shaking her. "You're not going to get those groceries away from *me,* you understand?"

"But I can't *get* you any—" Common sense came back to Edith, and she relaxed and said reasonably, "Why don't you take me along to the grocery? *They* can tell you I'm the wrong person."

"Take her to the grocery." The crowd took up the words; they began to move along down the block, and the red-faced woman marched in advance, almost dragging Edith, and shouting right and left, "I got her, I got her, I got the girl with the groceries."

The grocery was some two blocks away; they had gone only a block or so when they were met by a pack of children coming shrieking away from the grocery.

"Miz Eaton got it," they were howling, "Mis Eaton got all the groc'ries, Miz Eaton got the groc'ries, Miz Eaton found the girl with the red hat, Miz Eaton . . ."

The red-faced woman holding Edith stopped, stared, took one deep breath, and then turned to look at Edith, her face, if possible, redder than before.

"You mean to say," she began, in a voice obviously restrained to make her imminent wrath the more terrible, *"you mean to say* you told me you were that girl and you *aren't?"* She let go of Edith to put her hands on her hips and in that moment Edith, all dignity lost, turned and ran.

She darted down a side street, thinking for a moment that the red-faced woman was after her, but in a minute, from the sound of voices going up the street she had left, she realized that the red-faced woman had gone on with her following to the grocery, probably to dispute the decision. Breathing fast, Edith slowed down to a walk and began to look out for a place where she could spend one of her nickels on a cup of coffee and a chance to catch her breath. Ahead, she saw a dingy sign that hung over the sidewalk: it read KITTY'S LUNCH. Gratefully she hurried to it and, as she stepped inside, saw that Kitty had, with odd humor, chosen to adorn the window of Kitty's Lunch with a large painted blue cat.

*"Blue cat,"* said Edith to herself. "Kitty."

Not bothering to try and think any more, she went inside. Kitty's Lunch was nothing more than a

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long counter with sugar bowls and catsup bottles set at intervals along it, and Kitty herself—presumably—enthroned in vast state on a folding chair at one end of the counter. Edith sat at one of the counter stools and Kitty roused herself much as though Edith had been a mouse, and moved slowly down the counter to serve her, although it did not actually seem possible for there to be enough space behind the counter for Kitty to pass.

"Coffee," said Edith as Kitty almost reached her. "Black coffee, please."

Kitty nodded, and looked Edith up and down.

Edith tried to smile. "If you think I'm that Miss Murrain, I'm not," she said. "They've already found her."

"I'm mighty glad they did," Kitty said. "What is mismurrain?"

"Never mind," said Edith gratefully. "Do you know anything about omens?"

"Omens," said Kitty. "Mismurrain. No."

"Good," said Edith. "If you *did* find an omen, would you follow it?"

"I wouldn't follow a rainbow for a pot of gold," Kitty said obscurely.

She went with dignity to fetch Edith's coffee, which she set down before Edith with a queenly gesture.

By now, Edith thought, it had become inevitable. After Kitty had gone back to her chair at the end of the counter Edith took the slip of paper out of her pocket and consulted it, although she already knew what it said. *"Telephone,"* she said softly to herself, and then more loudly to Kitty, "Telephone?"

Kitty did not look up from her comic book, but gestured with a large thumb at the wall telephone at the end of the counter. It was not in a booth, it was not even remotely private from Kitty or from anyone else who might happen to come in, but the omen had been explicit so far, and Edith, two more of her precious nickels in her hand, hurried down to the end of the counter.

She dialed the number from memory, and waited interminably until they answered.

"Gambel's Garage."

"Is Jerry there?" said Edith timidly.

"Wait and I'll see." The voice echoed, far away. "Jerry? Jerrrrry? Lady onna phone."

After another deadly wait, during which Edith could hear her nickels washing away, he said, "Hello?"

"Jerry?" she said. "This is Edith."

"Edith?" His voice sounded surprised. "Is something wrong?"

"Jerry," she said weakly. "I'm sorry about keeping you waiting. I mean, I know what to do now. I mean, I guess if you want me to I'll marry you."

"Yeah?" She thought hopefully that he sounded rather more pleased than not. "Good," he said, and then she realized that he had known all the time that someday she would

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call him like this and tell him.

"Can you come and meet me?" she asked.

"I'm off for lunch in ten minutes. Where?"

"I'm in a blue cat," she said. "I mean, what does it matter! I mean —Just a minute. Where am I?" she turned to ask Kitty. Kitty lifted her face and gave Edith one long look.

"Corner of Flower Street and East Avenue," she said. "How long'd it take you to make up your mind?"

"Three years," said Edith. "Corner of Flower Street and East Avenue," she said to Jerry.

"Right," he said. "About twenty minutes, then. Who's going to take care of your mother?"

"She'll have to take care of herself," Edith said. *"I* need someone to take care of *me."*

"I'll go along with *that,"* said Kitty from the background.

"Right," Jerry said.

"And Jerry," Edith said. "Listen, will you bring—I mean—the omen says—I mean, do you have—can you get—"

"What?" said Jerry.

*"What?"* said Kitty.

"A ring," said Edith helplessly.

"I've already got it," Jerry said.

"What'd he say?" inquired Kitty with interest.

"He says he's got it," Edith told her.

"What?" Jerry said.

"Smart man," Kitty said.

"Goodby," Edith said to Jerry, and listened smiling to his answer. Then she hung up, made a face at Kitty, and said, "I'm not going to tell you."

Kitty grinned. "Three years to make up your mind," she said. "You must be crazy."

Granny Williams arrived home in style by taxi just as dinner was ready to be served, and just as her daughter had announced for the third time that she was going to call the police right *now* and just as her son-in-law had said for the twentieth time to give Granny a chance, she had been taking care of herself for eighty-seven years and could hardly get into trouble now.

"Well," said Granny, as her son-in-law and both grandchildren ran forward to take her packages, "what a day *I've* had." She smiled happily at everyone and added, "No surprises, now, till we all sit down."

"Are you all *right?"* said her daughter. "I was so worried."

Granny stared. "Of course I'm all right," she said. "Did you think I was arrested or something?"

When everyone was sitting in comparative quiet, at the dinner table, with dessert dishes (both grandchildren, in their excitement, had almost refused chocolate pudding) cleared away, and coffee cups set out, Granny leaned back in her chair and said with relish, "Now." She waved at her grandchildren and added, "You get my packages, but be *careful."*

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Hastily the grandchildren gathered the packages, not at all carefully, and brought them to Granny's lap. "Now," she said, drawing out the suspense as long as possible. "Are we all ready?" The grandchildren signified hysterically that they were all ready. Cautiously Granny lifted one package, turned it over and over, and set it down on the table. Her grandchildren, nearly expiring with curiosity, cried at once, "For me? Granny, for me?" Granny shook her head. "You just wait," she said. Finally she selected another package, poked it experimentally, and then formally handed it to her daughter. "For you," she said.

No one breathed while her daughter opened the package, with all due care for folding the wrappings, winding pieces of string, drawing out the operation. Finally, incredibly, a box appeared.

"Candy," said her daughter. "Granny, how *nice* of you!" She showed the box around appreciatively.

"Open it, open it," shouted the grandchildren.

"After Granny is through, we will all have a piece."

Next, the son-in-law opened his present. "A tie," he said with great enthusiasm. "Look, everyone, a beautiful blue and red and orange and green tie!"

The younger grandchild, the little girl who was supposed to look like Granny as a child, received a set of dishes and set immediately to serving everyone a second portion of chocolate pudding upon them. The older grandchild received a cowboy gun.

"Gee, Granny," he said. *"Gee."*

"You see," Granny explained, regarding her family lovingly. "I went and *lost* my *list."*

"Too bad," said her daughter, opening the candy box.

"A shame," said her son-in-law, regarding his tie dubiously.

"And," Granny went on, "I had to try to remember what you all wanted."

"This is what *I* wanted," said her older grandchild immediately. "Hands up," he added to his father.

*"And,"* Granny said to her daughter and son-in-law, "I met the most surprising young man. Right about lunch time, when I was just going into a restaurant for a cup of tea, he rushed right past me, and nearly knocked me down. It was very rude of him, but he was in a *great* hurry." Granny stopped and laughed at the expressions on the faces of her daughter and her son-in-law. "He stopped and apologized to me," she went on, "and would you believe it? He said he was going to be married. He said," she continued, sighing romantically, "that after three years of courting his lady had finally consented."

"Amazing," said her son-in-law.

"Charming," said his wife.

"It was positively *sentimental,"* said Granny happily.

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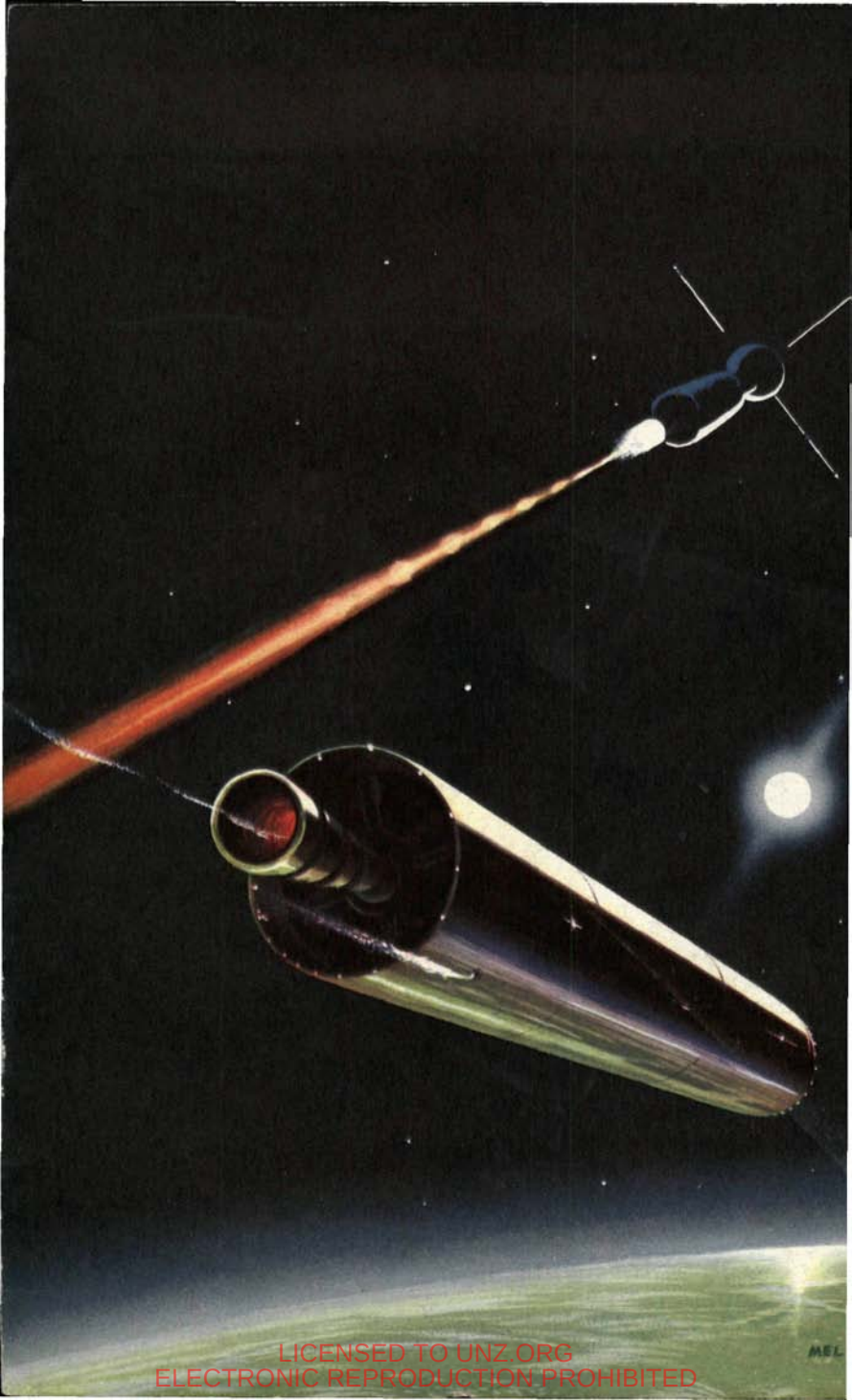


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